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KOSTOMUKSHA AT A TOURIST CROSSROADS: EXPERT PERSPECTIVES FROM AN ARCTIC BORDER CITY

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The study examines the challenges and prospects of tourism development in the Arctic city of Kostomuksha, located in the Karelian — Finnish borderland. Founded in the late 20th century as a model of Russian — Finnish cooperation, Kostomuksha is now seeking new development paths in the 21st century, following the cessation of cross-border mobility and cooperation. Given the depletion of natural resources, the municipality faces acute pressure to identify alternative development strategies, including a reorientation of its tourism sector. This study aims to identify promising directions for tourism development in Kostomuksha under the new conditions, drawing on data from a sociological survey of the expert community. The analysis is based on materials collected through a focus group and a series of semi-structured interviews conducted by the author in May 2024 with senior officials and key specialists from state, commercial, and non-profit organisations involved in the district's tourism sector. The findings highlight the main constraints on tourism development in the Kostomuksha urban district: economic limitations, infrastructural deficiencies, shortage of qualified personnel, weak marketing, environmental restrictions, and the pronounced seasonality of the tourism industry. Despite these challenges, nature-based tourism is identified as the priority direction, encompassing not only ecological but also active, cultural-educational, and event-related forms of tourism. The inclusion of Kostomuksha in the Arctic zone is viewed as an important factor in adjusting the municipality's strategic priorities. Considering its geographic location, the availability of sports and tourism infrastructure for winter activities, and the successful experience of organising large-scale events, winter tourism appears to be one of the most promising areas for further development. The study also underscores the necessity of cooperation among government, business, and civil society in shaping sustainable tourism in the urban district.

Keywords:

Kostomuksha, tourism development, borderland, Arctic, nature-based tourism, expert community

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Amid current challenges, the border town of Kostomuksha, the administrative centre of the urban municipal district, has transformed from a hub of cross-border cooperation and transboundary tourism in the Karelian—Finnish borderlands into a peripheral locality seeking a new trajectory of development as a tourist destination. This study aims to address several key questions: (1) what changes have taken place in tourism within this border municipality; (2) whether Kostomuksha's location in the Karelian Arctic Zone creates additional constraints or opportunities for tourism development; and (3) what short-term prospects exist for tourism in this border Arctic town. The research is based on data from a sociological survey of the expert community, including a focus group and a series of interviews, conducted by the author in Kostomuksha at the end of May 2024.

Kostomuksha municipal district: theoretical aspects

The research framework on borderlands issues and tourism development includes numerous studies showing how the operation of national borders both facilitates and restricts the growth of transboundary tourism. The medical-biological and geopolitical challenges of the 2020s, which terminated international tourist exchange in the Karelian—Finnish borderlands, are typical of all transboundary areas in the Baltic region.

Regarding the study territory — Kostomuksha municipal district (classified as an urban district before 21 April 2025)¹ — it is essential to consider its borderland, industrial and more recently Arctic status, which is broadly discussed in research works on this municipality. Firstly, given the industrial orientation of Kostomuksha's development — Karelia's youngest town, founded in 1982 — and that of its wider municipality, it is unsurprising that many studies address environmental issues and the challenges of further economic exploitation of the territory [1—3]. As has been aptly observed, the public portrayal of Kostomuksha on official platforms is inextricably linked to the establishment and growth of the local mining and processing plant [4]. For reference, JSC Karelsky Okatysh, a subsidiary of PJSC Severstal, is Russia's leading iron ore extraction and processing enterprise.

¹ In April 2025, pursuant to Law No. 3042-RK of 21 April 2025 On the Transformation of the Municipality "Kostomuksha Urban District" of the Republic of Karelia Following Its Designation as a Municipal District, adopted by the Legislative Assembly of the Republic of Karelia on 17 April 2025, the Kostomuksha Urban District was reorganized into the Kostomuksha Municipal District. The territory of the Kostomuksha municipal district includes the following settlements: the town of Kostomuksha (administrative centre), the settlement of Zarechny, and the villages of Voknavolok, Ladvozero, Pongaguba, Sudnozero, and Tolloreka. Since the Kostomuksha urban district was reorganized into the Kostomuksha municipal district in April 2025, the earlier names of organizations are retained in this article, while references to research groundwork, as well as citations of strategic and other official documents, preserve the terminology and designations in use at the time of writing.

The second major and extensively researched area is the tourism potential of the Kostomuksha municipal district, including its limitations and development prospects. Most studies do not focus exclusively on the town of Kostomuksha itself but instead consider a broader geographical context, while some concentrate specifically on the border municipality.

Research on the development of the Kostomuksha urban district encompasses topics such as strategic management in tourism [5; 6]; the municipality's protected areas, recreational use of natural resources and ecotourism [7–11]; historical and cultural heritage and residents' identity [4; 12–15]; prospects for the municipality and local tourism growth as assessed by the local population [16–19]; tourism infrastructure [20–22]; transboundary mobility [17; 23]; project-based activities [24]; and myths about the border town and their role in attracting tourists [25; 26].

The benefits of tourism-oriented development in the border municipality stemmed largely from its formerly well-established cross-border cooperation, which led to the creation of a network of protected natural areas and the development of new transboundary tourism products and routes, along with the promotion of cross-border tourism mobility. In this regard, the municipality's self-presentation in the Unified Tourism Passport is particularly illustrative: the Kostomuksha urban district is described as “a unique destination where Europe's last wild taiga expanse, Northwest Russia's largest mining enterprise, and ancient Karelian villages — the cradle of the Karelian-Finnish epic Kalevala — come together in one remarkable place”.¹

Given the significance of cooperation between the border municipality and neighbouring Finland, the literature frequently notes that media publications devoted to the western neighbour — emphasising that “international cooperation remained highly relevant for the border town” — were abundant even during the COVID-19 period, although the focus at that time shifted to the closure of national borders and the suspension of Schengen visa issuance [4, p. 15].

Studies examining the municipality's recently conferred ‘Arctic’ status merit particular attention. Despite the municipality's inclusion in the Karelian Arctic Zone, Arctic-related topics, according to a media analysis conducted by Karelian researchers, “are scarcely represented in local or social media in Kostomuksha; those that do appear are mainly intended to inform the population about the launch of relevant programmes. These issues are presented more clearly and in greater detail on the website of the Kostomuksha town district administration. The Arctic narrative is evidently promoted through ‘administrative’ means and has yet to generate first-hand accounts or evaluations of participation in such programmes and initiatives” [4, p. 15]. Given the data sources underpinning this study's findings,

¹ Unified Tourist Passport of the Kostomuksha Urban District, 2025, *Official Website of the Information and Tourist Centre of the Kostomuksha urban district*, URL: <https://kostravel.ru/turizm/turpasport/> (accessed 31.03.2025).

particular interest is directed towards research employing sociological methods to analyse various aspects of the Kostomuksha municipality's development [1; 5; 16; 27; 28].

To summarise, scholarly research on tourism development in the border Arctic locality of Kostomuksha remains relatively limited. Existing studies are narrow in scope and do not provide a comprehensive understanding of the state of tourism within the municipality — a particularly pertinent issue as the area undergoes a fundamental transformation in this sector in response to contemporary challenges. The present study seeks to address this gap.

Methods and data

This study aims to identify the trajectories of tourism development in the border Arctic town of Kostomuksha under current and evolving conditions, drawing on data from a survey of the local expert community. The research approach, which combines analysis of a focus group session with a series of semi-structured interviews, makes it possible to explore the following key aspects:

- the specific changes in the trajectory of tourism development in the border Arctic town of Kostomuksha in response to contemporary challenges;
- the main constraints on tourism development in the town under present and near-term conditions;
- prospective directions for tourism growth, taking into account both the municipality's location in the Russian—Finnish borderlands and its position within the Arctic region of Karelia.

The empirical basis of the study is the border Kostomuksha municipal district, whose external boundary coincides with the national border between the Russian Federation and Finland.

— The focus group comprised senior officials and leading specialists representing municipal authorities, major tourism organisations, protected natural areas, cultural institutions, and the non-profit sector. All participants were directly involved in tourism development or in providing services to visitors and residents of the municipality, and possessed relevant expertise in the subject under study. As part of a field study in the Kostomuksha urban district in May 2024, the author conducted a focus group session with 13 participants, along with five semi-structured interviews held at the International Barents Business Centre. The present research is based on the aggregated results derived from the analysis of these data. Tourism experts from the Kostomuksha municipal district included senior officials and leading specialists from the following organisations, invited either individually or through their respective institutions:

- Administration of the Kostomuksha urban district;
- Tourist Information Centre of the Kostomuksha urban district;
- Kostomuksha Town Museum;
- Kostomuksha Centre for Cultural Development;

- United Directorate of the Kostomuksha State Nature Reserve and Kalevala National Park;
- LLC Kotiranta (travel agency and holiday centre);
- Emerald Town holiday centre (private entrepreneur Lyubov Volkova);
- Kipatry tourist club (non-profit organization);
- Pryalka autonomous non-profit organization;
- TaivalTravel (recreation in the village of Pirttiguba)
- other institutions.

A substantial number of the organizations listed above have been key players in tourism development in the Kostomuksha municipal district. For example, Kotiranta, a company that until recently focused primarily on servicing transboundary tourist flows, has withdrawn from the Unified Federal Register of Tour Operators while maintaining its travel agency activities. As of 25 April 2024, no tour operators listed in the federal register were active within the municipality, whereas three such organisations had operated in the area prior to 2022. It is also noteworthy that the district administration and the directorate of the municipality's protected natural areas — represented by heads of relevant departments — have demonstrated a strong interest in promoting tourism development across the territory.

The two-hour focus group session addressed seven key questions aimed at eliciting the expert community's views on the current state, constraints, and development prospects of tourism in the border Arctic town of Kostomuksha under contemporary conditions. The semi-structured interviews consisted of eleven questions focusing on the need for tourism development in the Arctic municipality; the assessment of existing tourism potential and its exploitation; the current state of the tourism sector, including types of tourism, structure of tourist flows, average tourist profile, tour organization, intra- and inter-municipal cooperation, and the level of competition; and the identification of constraints and prospects for tourism development over the next five to ten years. Each interview lasted between thirty and ninety minutes.

Particular attention in both the focus group discussions and interviews was devoted to local community involvement in tourism activities, recreation opportunities for residents, and environmental issues. The following questions were discussed:

- What consequences (positive and negative) does tourism have for the environmental situation in the municipality?
- To what extent do the tourism business and the local population seek to mitigate them?
- What effects does tourism have on the local population? (focus group)
- What leisure and recreation opportunities exist for the local population?
- To what extent do residents make use of the municipality's tourism opportunities?

- Do you spend your leisure time locally? If so, where and why? (focus group)
- Does the local population participate in providing services to tourists? (interview)
- The shifts in the municipality's tourism development trajectory were explored through the following questions:
 - How have tourists in your municipality changed in recent years, and what changes have occurred in the range of services offered? (focus group)
 - What is the profile of tourists visiting your municipality?
 - What is the proportion of tourists arriving from the Republic of Karelia, other regions of Russia, and foreign countries? (interview)

The focus group and interview questions were complementary rather than overlapping, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the expert community's perspectives on the directions of tourism development in the border Arctic municipality, as well as on the existing constraints.

All participants were informed that the results of the study would be presented in aggregate form and published in academic journals. The focus group session and five semi-structured interviews were recorded and transcribed, followed by data analysis and interpretation of the findings.

Results

The border town of Kostomuksha at a tourism crossroads

Despite Kostomuksha's industrial development orientation, the municipality's strategic planning documents identify tourism as a key priority for socio-economic development. According to the Strategy 2030 for the Socio-Economic Development of the Kostomuksha Urban District, "the development of the municipal district's tourism industry, including the enhancement of its network of protected natural areas," is listed among the municipality's strategic objectives.¹ Several local companies have been recognised at the regional level for their achievements in tourism. For instance, the Kotiranta guesthouse has repeatedly won the regional Leaders of Karelian Tourism Business competition in the category Best Small Hotel (up to 30 rooms). Moreover, the hovercraft route Along Ancient Paths: Journey to Voknavolok and Kormilo, offered by the same company, was recognized as Russia's best ethnographic route in the finals of the fourth annual All-Russian Route of the Year 2017 award, organized with the support of Rostourism [28, p. 182—183].

¹ Strategy 2030 for the Socio-Economic Development of the "Kostomuksha Urban District" Municipality. Decision of the Council of the Kostomuksha Urban District dated 26.03.2020 №457-SO/III, 2020, *Kostomuksha Municipal District*, URL: <https://www.kostomuksha-city.ru/strategiya-sotsialno-ekonomicheskogo-razvitiya-munitsipalnogo-obrazovaniya-kostomukshskij-gorodskoj-okrug-do-2030-goda> (accessed 02.04.2025).

The municipality's border position played a critical role in its tourism-driven development. Yet it has now turned Kostomuksha from a hub of cross-border cooperation and transboundary tourism in the Karelian—Finnish borderlands into a peripheral town seeking ways to re-emerge as a tourist destination. The strategic documents of the Kostomuksha urban district, adopted before the onset of recent challenges, emphasized the territory's 'border location and proximity to Finland and thus the European Union', along with its 'transit and distribution' function. Although these advantages continue to occupy the top position in strategic planning documents, they have lost much of their former relevance. At the same time, the municipality's weaknesses have become increasingly evident, including "transport isolation — no air service; rail connections limited to twice a week; poor condition of the federal motorway; and the status of a restricted border area, which serves as a constraint on tourism development." (Interview excerpts.)

The Strategy envisaged development leveraging opportunities that are no longer available, such as closer international cooperation, the reconstruction and expansion of the Lyuttya border checkpoint, on the one hand, and unlocking the Arctic potential, including benefits for tourism and related services arising from the inclusion of the Kostomuksha urban district in Russia's Arctic Zone, on the other.¹ The document states that "incorporating the municipal district into the Arctic Zone, alongside a special regulatory framework for investment under the Kostomuksha Priority Development Area initiative, would provide further benefits to enterprises and entrepreneurs operating in the district".²

Under the new conditions, the expert community expresses considerable optimism regarding the opportunities associated with the Arctic, including those in the sphere of tourism development. As one focus group participant observed: "It seems to me that this is also inspiring in terms of positioning our region... not only as part of Karelia and our national culture... Now we have another recognisable and easily promotable element of our brand: the Arctic dimension".

At the same time, for a wide range of firms focused on Finnish tourists rather than Russians travelling to or from Finland, the closure of the national border created serious logistical, organizational and ultimately financial problems. Overcoming these challenges required a complete overhaul of company operations and a search for new tourism offerings, market niches and lines of activity. Nevertheless, some organizations were forced to shut down.

The Kostomuksha municipality's situation in tourism is aggravated by its remoteness from major cities — Petrozavodsk, Moscow and St Petersburg —

¹ Strategy 2030 for the Socio-Economic Development of the "Kostomuksha Urban District" Municipality. Decision of the Council of the Kostomuksha Urban District dated 26.03.2020 №457-SO/III, 2020, *Kostomuksha Municipal District*, p. 28—29, URL: <https://www.kostomuksha-city.ru/strategiya-sotsialno-ekonomicheskogo-razvitiya-munitsipalnogo-obrazovaniya-kostomukshskij-gorodskoj-okrug-do-2030-goda> (accessed 02.04.2025).

² Ibid. P. 70.

and the main transport routes of the Republic of Karelia (see Table). Unlike Sortavala, an established tourist destination in the Karelian—Finnish borderlands that combines unique recreational potential with reliable motorway and rail connections to Russia's central cities and the region's capital, Kostomuksha occupies a far less advantageous position.

**Transport connections between tourist hubs
in the Karelian—Finnish borderlands and major Russian cities**

Town	Railway connection, travel time (days of train operation in both directions)		
	Moscow	St. Petersburg	Petrozavodsk
Kostomuksha	No direct connection	Approximately 16 hours, one departure a day, twice a week	12—14 hours, one departure a day, twice a week
Sortavala	12—14 hours, one departure daily	4—6 hours, several departures a day	4—6 hours, several departures a day, 5 hours 23 minutes, one departure daily
<i>Distance</i>			
Kostomuksha	1491 km	891 km	495 km
Sortavala	972 km	270 km	246 km
<i>Bus connection</i>			
Kostomuksha	No direct connection	No direct connection	6 hours 30 minutes—9 hours, daily
Sortavala	No direct connection	5—6 hours, daily	4—6 hours, daily

As of 1 January 2024, the Kostomuksha urban district had a population of 26,500 residents, accounting for 5.1 % of the total population of the Republic of Karelia.¹ Unlike most other municipalities in the region, Kostomuksha has maintained a relatively favourable demographic situation.

Until recently, the Kostomuksha municipal district, together with the Kalevala national municipal district, comprised the Russian part of the second-order Mid-Karelian cross-border microregion, which handled one-fifth of the traffic on the Karelian section of the Russia—Finland boundary via the Lyuttya-Vartius border crossing, 30 km from the town. The two neighbouring countries were linked by several cross-border tourism routes, such as the White Road or Ontrei Malinen's Kantele, set up within international cross-border cooperation projects. Most of the projects implemented in the Kostomuksha urban district between 1990 and 2022 were funded under the Cross-Border Cooperation Programme of the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument, carried out from 2007 through 2013. Between 2001 and 2022, municipal organizations received grants

¹ Municipal Formations of the Republic of Karelia for 2023, in 2 volumes, 2024, *Statistical Digest*, Petrozavodsk, vol. 2, p. 9.

for 13 international projects; when including those in which these institutions participated as partners, the total number of projects implemented increases significantly.

In terms of tourism infrastructure — accommodation, dining, leisure and recreation — the Kostomuksha municipal district ranks among the top ten municipalities in the Republic of Karelia, and is second only to the Louhi municipal district among Arctic districts. The municipality's developed hospitality industry stems largely from its border location and former focus on transit tourists and cross-border shoppers, while its leisure and recreation infrastructure benefits from the area's remarkable natural and ethnocultural assets [28, p. 181].

Despite the decline in tourist flows, the Kostomuksha municipal district continues to attract visitors with its natural landmarks, including the Kostomuksha State Nature Reserve and the sections of Kalevala National Park located within its boundaries. Cultural and educational sites such as the rune-singing villages of Voknavolok and Akonlahti also remain key points of interest. The nature reserve preserves one of the oldest northern taiga forest areas in Northwest Russia, largely untouched by human activity, while the national park contains the largest stretch of primeval pine forest in the region, minimally affected by economic use, with trees over 120 years old covering more than 80 % of the forested area [10, p. 378—395].

During the Soviet period, the specific nature of borderland development under a strict state border regime enabled the preservation of extensive natural ecosystems along the frontiers between socialist and capitalist countries. The Green Belt of Fennoscandia forms a unique ecological framework with valuable recreational sites, unmatched elsewhere in Russia and offering significant potential for tourism development. International projects implemented along the Karelian section of the border contributed to the creation of a system of protected natural areas under federal and regional jurisdiction, covering a total of approximately 330,000 hectares, over 80 % of which is on the Russian territory [29].

Currently, a visitor centre — another outcome of international projects — operates to promote tourism in the Kostomuksha Nature Reserve. Both single- and multi-day ecological routes have been established, including seven hiking trails and two water routes. The national park has accommodation facilities and offers two one-day hiking trails and a one-day water route. Notably, the Marvels Nearby nature trail, situated within the town, is extremely popular with both residents and tourists: in 2023, it drew over 23,000 visitors [30], and in 2024, according to the director, around 26,000.

Before the closure of border crossing points, popular events included international music festivals such as the Chamber Art Festival, the Nordsession rock festival and the Kanteletar International Festival of Finno-Ugric Culture. Shopping tours across the Lyuttya-Vartius checkpoint were also common, undertaken by residents of Karelia and Finland, both in organised groups and independently.

In a special report by the Rossiya 24 TV channel on life in the border town of Kostomuksha, journalists highlighted concerns voiced by tourism experts. According to Olga Lekhtinen, head of a travel company, the tourism sector is 'losing a great deal': "For us, Finnish tourists and other tourists from Europe that we had hoped to attract through Finland and Finnish partners... they were, if not critical, then certainly very significant". Similar concerns were raised by Leonid Gundyrev, head of a passenger transport company, who stresses that "tourism cannot survive without visitors from Finland, since very few make it here because of poor transport accessibility". The heavy dependence of Kostomuksha's tourism industry on Finnish visitors is also confirmed by Nikolai Salakka, head of a hotel facility: "Eighty per cent of our guests were from Finland. The company welcomed 11 busloads of Finnish tourists daily".¹

Both in focus groups and interviews, experts confirm that the patterns of tourism have shifted significantly in the district, necessitating changes in approaches to its development. As one expert put it: "Previously, the administration focused on international relations. Domestic tourism hardly got any attention. So now, this is something new for us. We need to shift our focus to what we can develop here in our own town. It's really important to set up a coordinating council and update the tourism development programme for Kostomuksha — doing it together".

The district's Arctic localisation: emerging drivers or constraints?

The Kostomuksha municipal district became part of the Karelian Arctic Zone in 2020, although the first Karelian municipalities joined the region as early as 2017. On the one hand, this affiliation provides fresh momentum for tourism, given the strong interest in Arctic tourism development. On the other hand, it draws attention to the area's rather harsh natural and climatic conditions.

Despite the municipality's inclusion in the Karelian Arctic Zone, the expert community is fairly cautious in assessing the new impulses or prospects for Arctic tourism development. Yet, participants noted in passing certain 'advantages' of the municipality compared with Karelia's southern territories. Experts focus primarily on the municipality's current tourism and recreation potential — both its natural and human-made aspects — in the context of developing already established forms of tourism (an analysis of tourism types is provided below). Most participants emphasize the economic factors in tourism development.

Responding to the open-ended question, 'What do you see as the reasons for developing tourism in the Arctic areas of your municipality?', experts primarily cited economic factors and the multiplier effect generated by tourism. One respondent noted, "Tourism is important for our economic development, to keep tourists' money here. It is also crucial to make use of our advantage — or perhaps

¹ The life of the border town of Kostomuksha shown on federal TV, *Runa*, 2022, "Guberniya" Publishing House Information and Entertainment Project, 23.06.2022, URL: <https://runaruna.ru/articles/38000-federalnij-kanal-pokazal-kak-zhivet-prigranichnaya-kostomuksha/> (accessed 02.04.2025).

disadvantage — snow... which is here nine months a year. It is the end of May, and snow is still on the ground. This is part of the territory's brand. Kostomuksha definitely belongs to the Arctic". Similarly, a focus group expert observed, "Arctic Karelia is completely different from Southern Karelia. It has its own beauty, but unfortunately, in terms of tourism, infrastructure, and accessibility, the area is at a disadvantage. Production comes first here". Moreover, based on the conclusion of a state environmental review, "the total operational lifespan of the planned quarry is 35 years from 2018",¹ which places unprecedented responsibility on regional and municipal authorities for the future of the border Arctic municipality and increases the urgency of defining trajectories for its development.

In response to another open question, 'What do you think motivates tourism in the Arctic areas of your municipality? What attracts visitors?' Arctic identity was mentioned only in passing, with experts placing greater emphasis on the pristine nature, silence and tranquillity. Respondents commented on this matter as follows: "Everyone comes for the same thing: for silence and peace, and we still have that... the untouched wilderness is, of course, very appealing"; "pristine nature"; "as for the Arctic, this topic has come up only recently... the Arctic itself is associated with cold and hardship... of course, Arctic tourism should and must be developed... the nature here is clean... what's great about Kostomuksha is that there are no ticks or snakes, which is a major advantage". Experts also observed that the Kostomuksha urban district was included in the Arctic Zone for economic reasons and, unlike Karelia's well-established tourism brand, the Arctic narrative is only gaining momentum.

Arctic-focused events are held annually in Kostomuksha. The Arctic Snow Festival 'Along the Paths of Metsola' is one such event, organised by the Kostomuksha Nature Reserve in collaboration with the Kostomuksha municipal administration and the town's major enterprise, Karelsky Okatysh. In February 2025, the local family festival, which brings together winter sports enthusiasts of all ages, took place for the ninth time. Traditional two-day festival events include Nordic walking (mass start), classic-style ski races, snowshoe races, timed competitions on kicksleds and snow scooters, as well as activities for children.² The inclusion of the district in the Arctic Zone prompted the renaming of the traditional festival to reflect its Arctic character. As one focus group expert noted, "The Arctic Zone reframes the perspective. Before, we kept all of Karelia

¹ Positive Conclusion of the State Environmental Review for the Project on Developing the Reserves of the Central Segment of the Kostomuksha Iron Quartzite Deposit Quarry (Adjustment of the Mining and Transport Section), 2025, "SPb-Giproshakht" Design and Consulting Company, URL: <https://spbgiopro.ru/news/stati/polucheno-polozhitelnoe-zaklyuchenie-gosudarstvennoy-ekologicheskoy-ekspertizy-po-obektu-proekt-otra/> (accessed 02.04.2025).

² "Along the Paths of Metsola' Arctic Snow Festival Opens Its Doors Again!", 2025, Official Internet Portal of the Republic of Karelia, URL: <https://economy.gov.karelia.ru/search/?q=Тропами+Метсолы&how=r> (accessed 02.04.2025).

in mind, but now we also consider the Arctic Zone. Immediately after inclusion into the Arctic Zone, we renamed our festival the Arctic Festival. The festival is linked to winter tourism, sports and all kinds of winter activities”.

At the same time, due to the district’s harsh climate, the weather has a major impact on tourism development. Summers are cool and cloudy, with the warm season lasting three months and July — the hottest month — averaging a high of +20 °C and a low of +10 °C, while winters are snowy.¹ Respondents complained that they are “very dependent on the weather. Last year (2024. — S.K.), we did not have summer at all: +10 °C and rain. All summer. Even booked tours were cancelled 70 % of the time. That is the biggest downside for us”.

Tourism dimension of the town of Kostomuksha: current challenges and experts’ hopes

Central to developing any tourist destination is its tourism and recreation potential and the ability to utilise it fully, adhering to sustainable development principles and taking into account the interests of the local community. Experts unanimously observed the currently low utilisation of Kostomuksha’s tourism potential, attributing it primarily to present challenges and the crucial influence of transport and logistics factors. As one expert noted: “At the moment, the potential is underutilised because there’s no logistics. Kostomuksha is off the beaten track. People have to make a special trip to get here — it’s not somewhere tourists can stop by on the way. No, they have to come here deliberately”. Another participant remarked: “First of all, the transport factor is crucial. Then there is the information aspect, considering we are in such a backwater, with only Finland beyond us. You cannot pass through here in transit; you have to come on purpose, which means 99 % of tourists never reach us. They stay in southern Karelia — Sortavala, Petrozavodsk — also because of the awareness factor. Southern Karelia gets a lot of publicity; we do not. And I understand why: there just are not enough tourist products to offer. You can attract visitors, they’ll come, but what to do with them — we simply don’t know”. Alongside the transport and logistics constraints, the study identified several other factors holding back tourism development: insufficient marketing and a limited range of tourism offerings. Most experts’ expectations are tied to improvements in transport infrastructure — the planned opening of an airport in 2027, the expansion of train services and enhanced, more comfortable bus connections.

Out of the 17 types of tourism identified by experts during the interviews, seven were highlighted as priority avenues for the Kostomuksha town district: ecotourism (noted by 80 % of experts), sports tourism (80 %), heritage tourism

¹ Climate and Average Weather Year-Round in Kostomuksha, 2025, *Weather Spark*, URL: <https://ru.weatherspark.com/y/96775/Обычная-погода-в-Kostomuksha-Россия-весь-год> (accessed 31.03.2025).

(80 %), and family travel (40 %), with one in five experts also mentioning event tourism, business travel, and agritourism. The preference for nature-based forms of tourism is particularly notable.

Although the principal heritage tourism destinations are the village of Voknavolok, with its well-preserved Karelian way of life and dwellings, and the nearby small villages of Pongoguba, Sudnozero, Ladvozero, and Tolloreka, set within picturesque water-forest landscapes,¹ the types of tourism highlighted by experts — sports, event and heritage tourism — are not only rooted in the area's unique tourism and recreation potential. They also rely on principles of sustainable natural resource use. For example, the Petrunpäivä festival, or the Feast of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul, held since 1993 by the Kostomuksha Nature Reserve and marking the patronal holiday of the village of Akonlahti, is, according to the director of the reserve, the establishment's 'modest contribution to preserving and reviving the culture of the region's indigenous inhabitants' [13, p. 23]. In this village, first mentioned in chronicles in 1679, Elias Lönnrot recorded songs and runes, laying the groundwork for the world-famous epos *Kalevala*.² Moreover, to visit Akonlahti, which became part of the Kostomuksha Nature Reserve in 1983, visitors must "follow the reserve's ecological water route Along the Rune-Singing Sites and Old Settlements of Lake Kamennoe" [13, p. 22].

Sports tourism offers proliferating in the district include water tourism, such as whitewater summer rafting managed by local companies, and winter ski festivals that bring together families at the Kostomuksha Nature Reserve. Considerable effort put in organising sports events and the availability of corresponding infrastructure reinforce respondents' optimistic outlook on the prospects for sports tourism. In September 2024, a year-round fitness and wellness facility was opened in the town under the Demography national project. Experts' expectations centre on the planned development of an indoor ice rink and a ski-biathlon facility, along with the realisation of the human-made natural mountain landscape concept. So far, respondents can only lament that, "unlike Finland's Vuokatti resort, which features artificial as well as natural hills, the district has not yet utilised overburden material from the industrial plant for a potential ski resort".

A synthesis of expert opinions on the town's uniqueness, stemming from its location and its construction by Finnish builders in 1983, suggests that Kostomuksha is, above all, a 'forest' town. This uniqueness aligns well with 'the

¹ Strategy 2030 for the Socio-Economic Development of the "Kostomuksha Urban District" Municipality. Decision of the Council of the Kostomuksha Urban District dated 26.03.2020 №457-SO/III, 2020, *Kostomuksha Municipal District*, p. 69—70, URL: <https://www.kostomuksha-city.ru/strategiya-sotsialno-ekonomicheskogo-razvitiya-munitsipalnogo-obrazovaniya-kostomukshskij-gorodskoj-okrug-do-2030-goda> (accessed 02.04.2025).

² Petrunpäivä, 2025, *Official Website of the United Directorate of the "Kostomuksha" Nature Reserve and the "Kalevala" National Park*, URL: <https://kostzap.ru/saints-day> (accessed 31.03.2025).

key features of Kostomuksha conveyed in the traditional and social media', where 'the surrounding nature is presented as a source of pride... and the presence of a large mining enterprise is not perceived as harmful to the local environment' [4, p. 16]. As Aleksandra Basova, Head of the Kostomuksha Museum, aptly observed, "The Finnish designers integrated Kostomuksha into the landscape in a unique way: the result was a town within a forest — or a forest within a town." She illustrates this with a vivid example: "You can leave your flat in a nine-storey building and immediately step into the forest to pick berries".¹

As of 2022, the majority of tourists in the Kostomuksha urban district were independent travellers, accounting for 85 %, the highest share among border municipalities in the Republic of Karelia. According to expert assessments, the inbound flow of tourists and excursionists to the district reached approximately 25,000 people. The high proportion of independent tourists remains a pressing issue for the municipal administration, protected natural areas and tourism organizations. Among the reasons cited by respondents for this imbalance is the absence of local tour operators, as well as the outbound focus of the existing agencies' offerings (tours abroad or elsewhere in Russia). Experts' complaints are understandable: "There is no local tour operator. We used to have one. Now tourists are mainly brought here as part of packages by a company from Petrozavodsk; once tourists are here, attempts are made to come up with something, to make it work".

Describing changes in the municipality's tourism market, experts note a sharp decline in visitor numbers and a shift in its composition from a predominance of foreign tourists (70 %) to catering exclusively to Russian visitors. Respondents noted that "the number of tourists has fallen severalfold, since before COVID-19, Kostomuksha was an open town and served as a transit point to Finland and further to other parts of Karelia and Russia. There used to be queues and a significant flow of visitors." To partly compensate for this decline, significant emphasis is now placed on developing school tourism, with buses or trains bringing students from Karelian towns within curricular or extracurricular activities. Experts agree that "school tours should be developed, with one-day programmes combined with instruction. Geography and history lessons could be given within a single tour; pupils can visit Karelsky Okatysh to explore future career paths". In addition, they note the existence of a 'Karelia education law providing for subventions under which such activities can be financed'. Another underserved segment highlighted by experts is business travellers, who sometimes stay for several months at local accommodation facilities.

Drawing on its successful experience in international projects, the Kostomuksha expert community hopes for continued grant support from other sources,

¹ The life of the border town of Kostomuksha shown on federal TV, *Runa*, 2022, "Guberniya" Publishing House Information and Entertainment Project, 23.06.2022, URL: <https://runaruna.ru/articles/38000-federalnij-kanal-pokazal-kak-zhivet-prigranichnaya-kostomuksha/> (accessed 02.04.2025).

including federal or regional authorities and various foundations. Experts note an increase in grant opportunities, ‘which we (municipal organizations. — S.K.) actively make use of and which should soon bear fruit’. For example, the Emerald City campsite featuring the Lo Valley¹ rope adventure park opened in Kostomuksha in May 2023 within the Tourism and Hospitality Industry national project. Earlier, in 2022, the Kotiranta guesthouse received a 3 million rouble subsidy from the regional budget to implement an ethnic-style tourism project encompassing cultural events and accommodation opportunities.²

Experts believe that the emerging Arctic identity creates new opportunities for the territory’s development, as inclusion in the Arctic Zone has opened up additional economic prospects. New projects have emerged, along with the possibility of new funding. For instance, in September 2023, entrepreneur Olga Lekhtinen received federal funding of 37 million roubles to build modular non-permanent accommodation units on the premises of the Kotiranta tourist facility. The entrepreneur explains: “We are interested in increasing the attractiveness of Arctic regions for tourists. We want people to come north for our territory to develop, as is currently happening in the Ladoga region (Southern Karelia, centred on Sortavala. — S.K.). In constructing the facilities, we will follow modern modular building technologies and use locally sourced natural building materials”³.

Kostomuksha also participates in inter-municipal projects supported by the Grant Fund of the Head of the Republic of Karelia. For example, a 2022 grant titled Handmade Karelia: New Opportunities for Crafts in Regional Tourism (2 million roubles) aimed to create a platform for the craft sector rooted in the region’s cultural heritage, fostering, to this end, full collaboration among artisans, ethnocultural centres, tourism companies and local authorities.⁴

Other challenges for the municipality include poor coordination among tourism organizations, limited marketing of tourism products beyond Kostomuksha — i. e., across Karelia and other Russian regions (within the town, only a few information boards have been installed as part of international projects) — and a shortage of tourism offerings. Experts note that tourism development in the town “is

¹ Thanks to State Support, a New Camping Site with a Rope Adventure Park Opens in Kostomuksha, 2023, *Official Karelia*, 12.12.2023, URL: <https://economy.gov.karelia.ru/news/12-12-2023-blagodarya-gospodderzhke-v-kostomukshe-rabotaet-novyy-kemping-s-verechochnym-parkom-razvlecheniy/> (accessed 31.03.2025).

² Kotiranta Received a Grant, *64th Parallel Online*, 04.08.2022, URL: <https://64parallel.ru/novosti/kotiranta-poluchil-grant/> (accessed 02.04.2025).

³ “Arctic Star” to Shine in Kostomuksha, *64th Parallel Online*, 20.09.2023, URL: <https://64parallel.ru/novosti/arkticheskaya-zvezda-zasiyaet-v-kostomukshe/> (accessed 02.04.2025).

⁴ Handmade Karelia: New Opportunities for Crafts in Regional Tourism, *Official Website of the Grant Fund of the Head of the Republic of Karelia*, URL: <https://xn--80akjfh2a2i.xn--80af5akm8c.xn--p1ai/public/application/item?id=6fe1c9bc-adfe-468f-be9f-7a087c9ef657> (accessed 02.04.2025).

constrained by the lack of information... There is very interesting material, and it could be presented not academically, but in a popular, engaging and captivating way. If such information were available in leaflet form, every entrepreneur working in tourism could organise and conduct a series of tours in these locations". This concern is echoed in another expert's remark: "There is no single point where tourism opportunities can be brought together. It is not only that visiting tourists struggle to figure out what and where things are — we ourselves do not even know what is available". During the focus-group discussion, one participant summarised: "So, what are the difficulties? Transport accessibility, lack of hotels, low-quality service, absence of information and promotion. Are there enough tourist attractions? Are there prospects for new ones?"

At the same time, while acknowledging tourists' interest in local Karelian cuisine, experts question the profitability of opening specialised venues outside festival periods, such as the Vendace Festival. "On other days, when there are no festivals and no large numbers of tourists who specifically want Karelian cuisine, there is no demand. Ordinary townspeople want sushi and pizza. The café is unprofitable, completely unprofitable. We don't have such an influx of tourists. Nor even a steady flow of people who could ensure a constant income. That is why masterclasses are preferred: you devote three hours and can then focus on other activities... Whereas a café requires service, staff, rent — it is a completely different undertaking".

Another concern involves the district's missed opportunities. One such example is the annual Land of Kalevala Festival in St Petersburg, which brings together participants from over thirty countries worldwide. Karelia joined the event only at its fifteenth edition, having only recently learned of its existence. Experts express several reasons for regret in this situation. First, Elias Lönnrot's fourth expedition took place precisely within the present-day territory of the Kostomuksha municipal district. Second, there is currently "not a single tangible marker" commemorating this fact. Third, "fewer and fewer people remember Elias Lönnrot with each passing year". Seeking to consolidate local resources, experts proposed joint efforts to prepare for the 190th anniversary of the first edition of Kalevala. A further positive development has been the intensified work on designing new interactive routes for Russian tourists, including both adults and schoolchildren, such as the proposed "Hello, Kostomuksha" immersive city tour.

It is noteworthy that the adjectives chosen by focus group participants to characterise contemporary tourism in the Kostomuksha municipal district were highly indicative (each expert was asked to write three adjectives at the end of the session). Taken together, the responses predominantly highlight positive qualities and development prospects for tourism in the area. The adjectives were grouped thematically by the author of this study as follows:

- Type of tourism: 'wild' (4 responses), rejuvenating, event-based, cultural, educational, diverse
- Prospects: promising (3 responses), encouraging

- Current condition: developing, actual
- Emotions: delightful, beautiful, wonderful, enchanting, beloved
- Organization: independent (2), spontaneous
- Negative characteristics: harsh, unworthy, illegal
- Cost-related characteristics: expensive

The adjective ‘wild’ merits particular attention: used four times as a synonym for ecotourism, it highlights the Kostomuksha municipal district’s distinctive quality as a protected area largely untouched by human activity. This definition arises from the focus-group discussion and the experts’ sense of pride in the district’s pristine (‘wild’) nature. The adjective is also associated with the term ‘rejuvenating’, symbolising opportunities for a digital detox for residents of large cities within the preserved natural environment (the term ‘digital detox’ was repeatedly mentioned by experts as a key asset for tourism development in the municipality).

Experts are unanimous in profiling the typical tourist: a married couple in their late thirties or early forties with children aged 10 to 15, from major cities, travelling independently and purchasing specific services that interest them from local providers.

Summarising the expert community’s assessment of the key constraints on tourism development in the Kostomuksha municipal district, the following factors can be distinguished:

- infrastructural limitations, including transport and logistics challenges, as well as insufficient accommodation and catering facilities;
- seasonality of tourism;
- marketing weaknesses, such as the limited online promotion of the district’s tourism and recreational potential and available products;
- shortage of qualified personnel;
- economic constraints, which could be alleviated through more effective participation of the municipality in federal and regional programmes aimed at attracting funding, as well as through stronger engagement of local businesses and the non-profit sector;
- conservation-related restrictions, encompassing legal requirements for environmental protection and limitations on access to certain areas (visitors, particularly foreign nationals, are required to obtain permits); the lengthy approval process for new sites and routes; and practical difficulties in establishing snow-mobile trails, including negotiations with land leaseholders, securing permission to cross frozen rivers in winter, and installing appropriate signage;
- environmental risks associated with increased human activity in protected areas.

Environmental concerns run as a common thread throughout both the focus group and the interviews. Experts are primarily concerned about the level of ecological awareness among local residents rather than visiting tourists, noting that “most of the litter does not come from kayakers, but from those who go out

for barbecues — mostly locals. There is also vandalism.” They also expressed apprehension about uncontrolled tourist flows, which could have adverse effects on the northern ecosystem. As one focus group participant observed, “Northern nature recovers very slowly and with difficulty, and this must be taken into account when designing routes. There must be limits on the number of people per group.” Another expert added, “Where there are many tourists, especially independent ones, the terrain becomes completely trampled. The natural cover is destroyed. Campsites therefore need to be properly organised, with designated paths and toilet facilities”.

These observations highlight the expert community’s strong sense of responsibility for preserving fragile ecosystems and its commitment to promoting the principles of sustainable resource management. Despite the fact that many organizations participating in the focus group have long been key actors in tourism development within the Kostomuksha municipal district, a clear lack of both vertical and horizontal networking remains evident. For example, several experts met each other in person for the first time at the International Barents Business Centre in Kostomuksha during the focus group organized by the author. The shortage of horizontal linkages may be partly explained by the previously high demand for cross-border tourism services, when cooperation with other local organizations was not seen as particularly necessary. Within the ‘authorities — business — community’ framework, some organizations were reported to maintain productive collaboration with the relevant administrative committees, whereas for others this remains an objective yet to be achieved.

Conclusion

In summary, the border Arctic municipality of Kostomuksha is facing significant challenges that have fundamentally altered its previously successful tourism development trajectory. Foremost is the transformation of the district from a hub of cross-border cooperation and tourism in the Karelian—Finnish borderlands into a peripheral settlement actively seeking new pathways for developing as a tourist destination. The limited iron quartzite reserves and the relative obsolescence of strategic documents on certain development opportunities and prospects further exacerbate the challenge of identifying new directions within a constrained timeframe of roughly 35 years. The emergence of the Arctic angle as a factor in the tourism-driven development of the territory is regarded by experts with caution, seen primarily as an opportunity to create a new brand and leverage new economic prospects. The municipality’s unique characteristics, with protected areas covering one third of its territory, largely determine the specifics of its tourism industry and local recreation. The study found that most types of tourism developing in the Kostomuksha municipal district are nature-oriented, encompassing not only ecotourism but also sports, cultural and heritage, event-based, and family tourism.

Given the broad range of constraints on tourism development in the border Arctic municipality, stemming both from the particularities of the destination's development and the impact of contemporary challenges, the following recommendations appear to be the most effective for addressing them.

1. Current circumstances require a reorientation of tourism in Kostomuksha from cross-border travel and international transit toward domestic tourism, with particular attention to previously overlooked visitor groups such as schoolchildren and business travellers. Targeted engagement with these audiences may also help to mitigate the effects of seasonality.

2. Winter tourism and related services may constitute a particularly promising area for development, given the district's Arctic location, consistent snow cover, and the availability — as well as ongoing improvement — of sports and tourism infrastructure for winter activities. The municipality's prior experience in hosting successful events further strengthens this potential.

3. A science-based approach is essential for the effective development of tourism in the Kostomuksha municipal district. Comprehensive geographical and ethnographic studies of Kostomuksha and its surroundings would help to identify the area's distinctive features and emphasise its unique appeal, providing strong incentives for visitation. A clearer understanding of the municipality's strengths would, in turn, facilitate the creation of new tourism products and expand opportunities to attract visitors from within the Republic of Karelia, other Russian regions, and abroad.

In conclusion, it is important to emphasize that contemporary challenges compel all segments of the triad — authorities, business, and society — to reconsider development opportunities through the lens of cooperation and collaboration for the benefit of the municipality's socio-economic progress. At present, interactions within the municipality remain somewhat fragmented, resulting in the absence of a comprehensive approach to tourism development. While such fragmentation may once have been economically justified, current conditions call for stronger networking between commercial and non-commercial tourism organizations. Establishing a tourism council under the district administration could play a pivotal role in facilitating this process. Regular meetings of the triad's representatives would make it possible to gain a fuller understanding of existing challenges in tourism development, identify priority areas for joint action, generate new tourism initiatives, and strengthen applications for state subsidies and grants from various funding bodies. Given the distinctive contributions of both commercial and non-commercial tourism providers, the Kostomuksha municipal district would benefit more from coepetition, constructive cooperation amid competition, than from rigid rivalry.

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