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THE STRATEGIC ROLE OF TRABZON IN BLACK SEA CRUISE TOURISM: A SPATIAL ANALYSIS

Abstract

This study examines the spatial dynamics of cruise tourism in the Black Sea Basin, with a particular focus on the strategic role of the Port of Trabzon. The research aims to evaluate Trabzon's position within regional cruise tourism networks and analyse its development trajectory over time. A mixed-methods approach was adopted, combining quantitative data on cruise ship calls and passenger volumes (2011–2025) with qualitative insights derived from field observations and stakeholder perspectives. The findings reveal that Trabzon possesses significant advantages in terms of its strategic location on the southern Black Sea coast, its proximity to major natural and cultural attractions, and its historical identity as a port city. These features enable the development of integrated, short-duration tourism itineraries suitable for cruise passengers. However, the results also indicate that cruise tourism in Trabzon has followed a fluctuating and fragile pattern, largely influenced by external factors such as geopolitical tensions in the Black Sea region, changes to Istanbul-centered cruise routes, and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite a notable recovery after 2022, the current growth trend does not yet reflect a fully stable and sustainable development structure. The study concludes that, to strengthen its position in the Black Sea cruise tourism network, Trabzon requires improvements in port infrastructure, enhanced port–city integration, and strategic planning aligned with sustainability and regional cooperation. Overall, the study contributes to the geographical literature by providing a spatially grounded assessment of cruise

tourism in a secondary maritime basin and highlights the evolving role of Trabzon as a potential regional tourism hub.

Keywords: Blacksea, Cruise Tourism, Trabzon, Spatial Analysis.

KARADENİZ KRUVAZİYER TURİZMİNDE TRABZON’UN STRATEJİK ROLÜ: MEKÂNSAL BİR ANALİZ

Öz

Bu çalışma, Karadeniz Havzası’nda kruvaziyer turizminin mekânsal dinamiklerini, özellikle Trabzon Limanı’nın stratejik rolüne odaklanarak incelemektedir. Araştırma, Trabzon’un bölgesel kruvaziyer turizm ağları içindeki konumunu değerlendirmeyi ve zaman içerisindeki gelişim seyrini analiz etmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu doğrultuda, 2011–2025 yılları arasındaki kruvaziyer gemi uğrakları ve yolcu sayıları gibi nicel veriler ile saha gözlemleri ve paydaş görüşlerinden elde edilen nitel bulguların birleştirildiği karma yöntem yaklaşımı benimsenmiştir. Elde edilen bulgular, Trabzon’un Karadeniz’in güney kıyısındaki stratejik konumu, önemli doğal ve kültürel çekim merkezlerine yakınlığı ve liman kenti kimliği sayesinde önemli avantajlara sahip olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Bu özellikler, kruvaziyer yolcularına yönelik bütünsel ve kısa süreli turizm rotalarının geliştirilmesine olanak tanımaktadır. Bununla birlikte, sonuçlar Trabzon’da kruvaziyer turizminin dalgalı ve kırılmalı bir seyir izlediğini; bu durumun büyük ölçüde Karadeniz bölgesindeki jeopolitik gerilimler, İstanbul merkezli kruvaziyer rotalarındaki değişimler ve COVID-19 pandemisi gibi dışsal faktörlerden etkilendiğini göstermektedir. 2022 sonrası dönemde gözle görülür bir toparlanma yaşanmasına rağmen, mevcut büyüme eğilimi henüz tam anlamıyla istikrarlı ve sürdürülebilir bir gelişim yapısını yansıtmamaktadır. Çalışma, Trabzon’un Karadeniz kruvaziyer turizm ağındaki konumunu güçlendirebilmesi için liman altyapısının geliştirilmesi, liman-kent entegrasyonunun artırılması ve sürdürülebilirlik ile bölgesel iş birliği ekseninde stratejik planlamaların yapılması gerektiği sonucuna varmaktadır. Genel olarak çalışma, ikincil bir deniz havzasında kruvaziyer turizmine mekânsal temelli bir değerlendirme sunarak coğrafya literatürüne katkı sağlamakta ve Trabzon’un potansiyel bir bölgesel turizm merkezi olarak değişen rolünü ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Karadeniz, Kruvaziyer Turizm, Trabzon, Mekansal Analiz.

1. INTRODUCTION

Today, individuals who are moving away from traditional sea–sun–sand tourism experiences and seeking more authentic and unique experiences are increasingly turning to alternative forms of tourism. This approach, which has emerged as an alternative to mass tourism, encompasses both small-scale tourism activities based on the natural and cultural resources of local communities and independent travel undertaken by a limited number of individuals to remote destinations (Özgüç, 2013).

The diversity of alternative tourism offers various opportunities for both tourists and local communities. While tourists can move away from crowded and standardised tourism experiences to enjoy more personal, authentic, and culturally enriched experiences, local residents gain the

opportunity to utilise their natural and cultural resources in a sustainable manner through tourism.

This situation plays an important role not only in generating economic benefits but also in preserving local culture and increasing environmental awareness. Especially in developing regions, alternative tourism has the potential to support community-based development and to limit the negative impacts that may arise from mass tourism.

With the increasing importance of alternative tourism, cruise tourism has emerged as a prominent form of tourism among sea-based alternatives. In addition to sea travel, this type of tourism includes various activities such as port visits, excursions to nearby areas, and shopping. It typically begins at a specific port and proceeds along a pre-determined itinerary (İncekara & Yılmaz, 2002). In this respect, cruise tourism offers tourists the opportunity to experience multiple destinations within a short period while also contributing to the economic and cultural vitality of the port cities visited.

Referred to as “cruise tourism” in the international literature, this form of tourism is defined not merely as maritime transportation from one point to another but as a comprehensive tourism experience that enables passengers to visit multiple destinations within a single journey (Wild & Dearing, 2000). Throughout the journey, it integrates accommodation, food and beverage services, entertainment, recreation, and various touristic activities, thereby offering both transportation and holiday experiences simultaneously. In this sense, cruise tourism represents a multidimensional travel form that transforms sea travel into a packaged holiday experience (Bayazıt, 2015). Cruise ships, which make this multidimensional experience possible, can be considered floating hotels. Equipped with all the amenities and services of a five-star hotel, these vessels are meticulously designed and outfitted to ensure passenger comfort throughout the journey (Tor-Kadioğlu, 2020).

Cruise tourism has been extensively addressed in the international literature within the frameworks of tourism studies, transport research, and port planning. These studies have examined in detail various aspects such as economic impacts, destination management, passenger profiles, the formation of cruise routes, and the development of port infrastructure (Dwyer & Forsyth, 1998; Lemmetyinen et al., 2016; Bruzzi & Benevolo, 2022). In particular, studies focusing on the Mediterranean Basin and the Caribbean (Wood, 2000; Anne Lester & Weeden, 2004; Lekakou & Pallis, 2005; Karlis & Polemis, 2018) reveal the multidimensional impacts of cruise tourism on coastal cities.

In Türkiye, the literature on cruise tourism is not limited in terms of quantity or thematic diversity (Oral & Esmer, 2010; Kızılırmak et al., 2015; Bayazıt, 2017; Deniz, 2017; Özcan & Özen Turan, 2021; Polat et al., 2022; Yaşar et al., 2023). However, from a disciplinary perspective, studies addressing cruise tourism within the field of geography remain relatively limited (Sezer, 2014, 2022; İncedere, 2020; Sargın & Konurhan, 2021). Core geographical issues such as spatial organisation, port–city interactions, the use of coastal spaces, and regional differentiation have not been sufficiently explored. This indicates that studies examining the development of cruise tourism in Türkiye from a geographical perspective can provide complementary and in-depth contributions to the literature.

Participation in cruise tourism has shown a steady increase worldwide over the years. In 2019, approximately 30 million people participated in cruise tourism; however, this activity came to a near standstill in 2020 due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Cruise travel resumed

in 2022, with over 20 million participants during that year. By 2024, the number of participants approached 35 million, surpassing pre-pandemic levels (Table 1). The approximately 75% increase observed over the last two years indicates a rapid recovery in demand for cruise tourism.

The regions with the highest participation in cruise tourism are those where developed countries are concentrated. North America has the highest passenger capacity, followed by Europe. However, Europe remains significantly behind North America; in 2024, more than 20 million passengers participated in cruise tours in North America, whereas the figure in Europe was approximately 8.5 million. The region with the lowest participation in cruise tourism is Central America.

Table 1.

Passenger Volume by Source Regions (thousand persons).

Continents	2019	2022	2023	2024
North America	15.408	12.592	18.103	20.525
Western Europe	7.226	5.434	7.722	7.931
Asia	3.738	791	2.329	2.632
Australia–New Zealand–Pacific	1.352	471	1.339	1.408
South America	935	426	997	1075
Eastern Europe	263	161	332	374
Middle East	108	149	229	181
Africa	168	88	150	144
Scandinavia–Ireland	218	131	151	131
Caribbean	57	30	48	52
Central America	49	20	35	43
Total	29.522	20.293	31.435	34.496

Source: Cruise Lines International Association, 2024.

When evaluated on a country basis, the United States ranks first in the world in terms of the number of cruise passengers, with approximately 20 million passengers (Table 2). The United States is followed by Germany, with around 2.5 million passengers, and the United Kingdom–Ireland duo, which has a similar number of passengers. Australia ranks fourth with approximately 1.3 million passengers, while Canada ranks fifth with around 1.2 million passengers.

The United States' dominant position in cruise tourism participation is largely attributed to its proximity to highly popular cruise destinations such as the Caribbean, its possession of some of the world's largest cruise ports—such as Miami and Port Canaveral (Braun, 1990)—and the fact that many of the major cruise companies are headquartered in the United States. As a result, the number of cruise passengers from the United States exceeds even the combined total of the other countries listed.

Table 2.

Top Five Countries Contributing the Highest Number of Cruise Passengers (thousand persons).

Countries	2019	2022	2023	2024
USA	14.199	11.890	16.875	19.122
Germany	2.587	1.876	2.513	2.574
United Kingdom and Ireland	1.992	1.664	2.281	2.400
Australia	1.241	457	1.250	1.324
Canada	1.037	567	1.031	1.183

Source: Cruise Lines International Association, 2024.

Türkiye's location, being surrounded by the seas on three sides, provides the country with significant potential in terms of cruise tourism. Following the Caribbean, the Mediterranean Basin constitutes the second most intensive region for cruise tourism at the global scale (Sezer, 2022). In this context, Türkiye—owing to its strategic geographical position—has been gradually increasing its share of this tourism sector.

In particular, Galataport Istanbul, which became operational in 2021, serves as the main cruise port of Türkiye. Galataport stands out with its approximately 29,000 m² area and its distinction as the world's first underground cruise terminal. At the port, passport and customs procedures are carried out in the underground terminal; by relocating transportation vehicles such as taxis, tour buses, and minibuses underground, uninterrupted coastal use at ground level and the preservation of the sea view are ensured (Galataport Istanbul, 2025).

In addition to Galataport Istanbul, there are several ports in Türkiye capable of accommodating cruise ships, including Antalya, Kuşadası, Çeşme, Alanya, Bodrum, and Trabzon. All of these ports are members of the Mediterranean Cruise Ports Association (MedCruise) and constitute part of the international cruise network.

This study aims to reveal the strategic importance of the Port of Trabzon—one of the Black Sea ports that is a member of MedCruise—in terms of cruise tourism.

1.1. Location and Geographical Characteristics of the Study Area

Trabzon, which constitutes the study area, is located in northeastern Türkiye, within the Eastern Black Sea subregion of the Black Sea Region. In terms of its mathematical location, the province lies between 40°30'–41°30' north latitudes and 38°30'–40°30' east longitudes. Owing to its coastline along the Black Sea to the north, Trabzon has historically held a significant position in terms of maritime transportation and trade.

The province is bordered by Gümüşhane and Bayburt to the south, Rize to the east, and Giresun to the west. This geographical setting enables Trabzon to function as a transitional zone between the Black Sea coastal belt and the inland areas. Covering an area of approximately 4,664 km², Trabzon is characterised by settlement areas extending along the coastline and transportation axes developing parallel to the sea, which collectively contribute to its high level of regional accessibility (Figure 1).

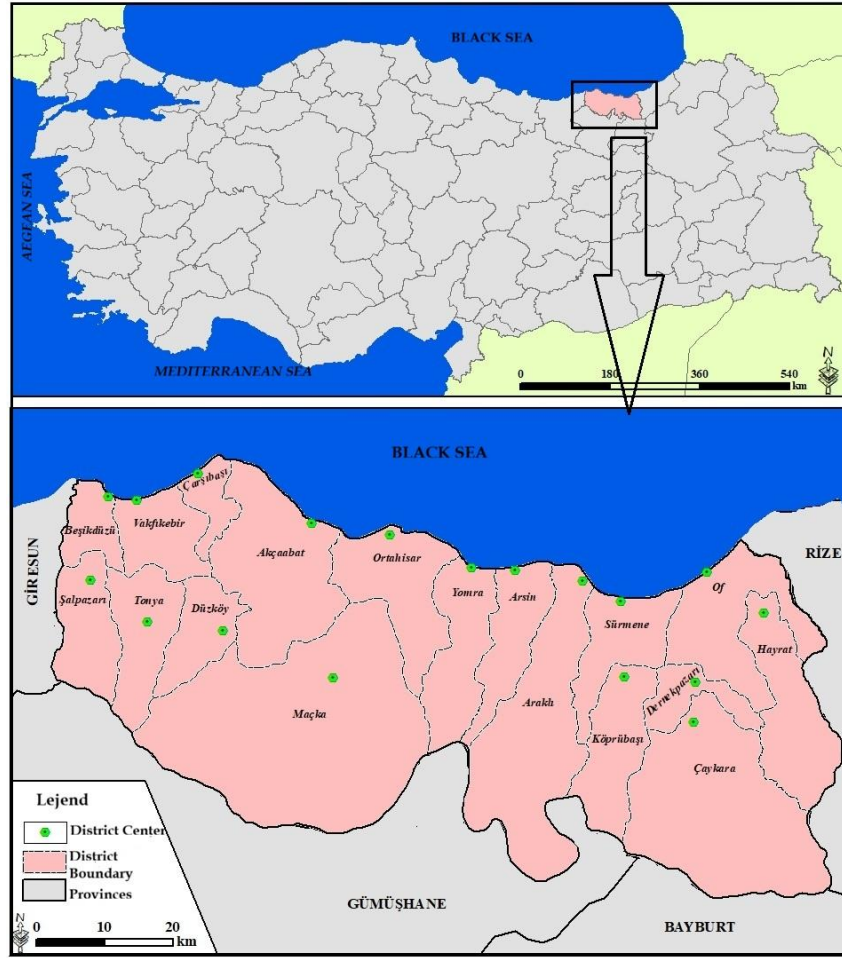


Figure 1. Location of the Study Area.

The physical geographical characteristics of Trabzon reflect the general features of the Black Sea coastal belt through several distinctive elements. The province exhibits a mountainous and rugged topography that rises rapidly over short distances from the coastline. These mountain ranges, which constitute the eastern extensions of the North Anatolian Mountains, run largely parallel to the coast and limit the natural transition between the coastal and inland areas. This morphological structure has led to the concentration of settlements predominantly along the coastline and within valley floors (Erinç, 1945; Atalay, 1982).

The coastline of Trabzon is generally narrow with limited indentation, resulting in a scarcity of natural harbours. However, relatively sheltered areas along the coast have historically facilitated the development of ports and piers. This indicates that the location of the Port of Trabzon has been shaped by a combination of natural and human factors (Doğanay, 2014). The characteristics of the coastal structure are directly related to wave, current, and wind regimes, which are critical for the docking and operational processes of cruise ships.

The climate of Trabzon is characterised by the Black Sea climate, exhibiting mild and humid conditions throughout the year. The region receives an average annual precipitation of approximately 830 mm, which supports the preservation of its lush natural environment and the development of rich vegetation (Turkish State Meteorological Service, 2026). The annual average

temperature is around 15°C. While the highest monthly precipitation occurs in October (113.6 mm), the lowest is recorded in July (36.7 mm). In terms of temperature, the highest average temperature is observed in August (23.5°C), whereas the lowest average temperature occurs in February (7.4°C) (Figure 2).

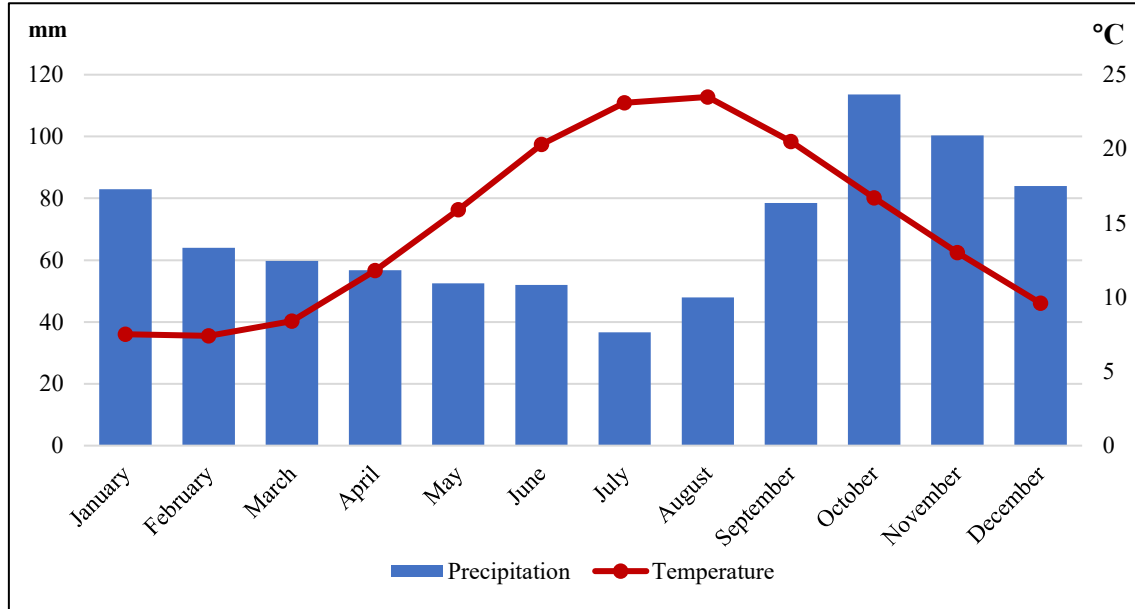


Figure 2. Average Precipitation and Temperature Graph of Trabzon (1927–2024).

The high annual precipitation and limited temperature variation in Trabzon ensure that the natural vegetation remains vibrant throughout the year. This condition constitutes a significant attraction for nature- and landscape-based tourism activities. However, high humidity levels and the precipitation regime are among the main environmental factors influencing the seasonal distribution of tourism activities. In particular, more stable weather conditions and favourable sea conditions during the summer months increase the accessibility of Trabzon for cruise tourism, leading to a concentration of tourist demand in this period.

The fact that the settlement history of Trabzon dates back to pre-Christian times indicates that the city possesses a rich historical and cultural heritage, which significantly enhances its tourism potential. The earliest known settlements in the region are believed to have been established by Milesian colonists arriving via Sinop during the 7th–8th centuries BCE (Bilgin, 1990). These early settlements provide an important historical background for tourism, demonstrating that Trabzon developed as a significant port and trade centre along the Black Sea coast since antiquity. By the 4th century BCE, the existence of a permanent settlement in Trabzon had been firmly established, and the first written records about the city were documented by the Athenian historian Xenophon (Fallmerayer, 2011). The reference to the city as “Trapezos” in Xenophon’s works documents the historical continuity of Trabzon from ancient times to the present and enhances its value in terms of cultural tourism (Öksüz, 2005).

Conquered by the Ottoman Empire in the second half of the 15th century, Trabzon became an administrative, commercial, and cultural centre during the Ottoman period. The mosques, inns, baths, and other historical structures constructed during this era have become important components of urban tourism today (İnan, 2003). The city, which was briefly occupied by Russian

forces during World War I, was later regained under Turkish sovereignty and continued its development while preserving its historical identity (Doğanay, 1986; Tuncel, 2012). With the establishment of the Republic in 1923, Trabzon gained provincial status and, with its multilayered historical heritage, architectural assets, and cultural values, has become one of the leading destinations for cultural and historical tourism in the Black Sea Region today.

As of 2025, the total population of Trabzon is 823,323, making it the most populous province in the Eastern Black Sea Region. In the first general population census of the Republican period in 1927, the population of the province was recorded as 293,550. In subsequent years, particularly due to natural population growth and socio-economic developments, the population increased significantly, reaching 420,279 by 1950. This upward trend continued until 1980, when the population reached 731,045. The year 2000 marked a turning point in Trabzon's demographic history, with the population peaking at 975,137. However, after 2000, the population growth rate slowed due to out-migration driven primarily by economic reasons, as well as educational and employment opportunities, and by 2010, the population had declined to 763,714 (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2024). Since 2010, population decline has halted, and it is observed that the population of Trabzon has entered a new growth phase, influenced by urban development and return migration trends (Figure 3).

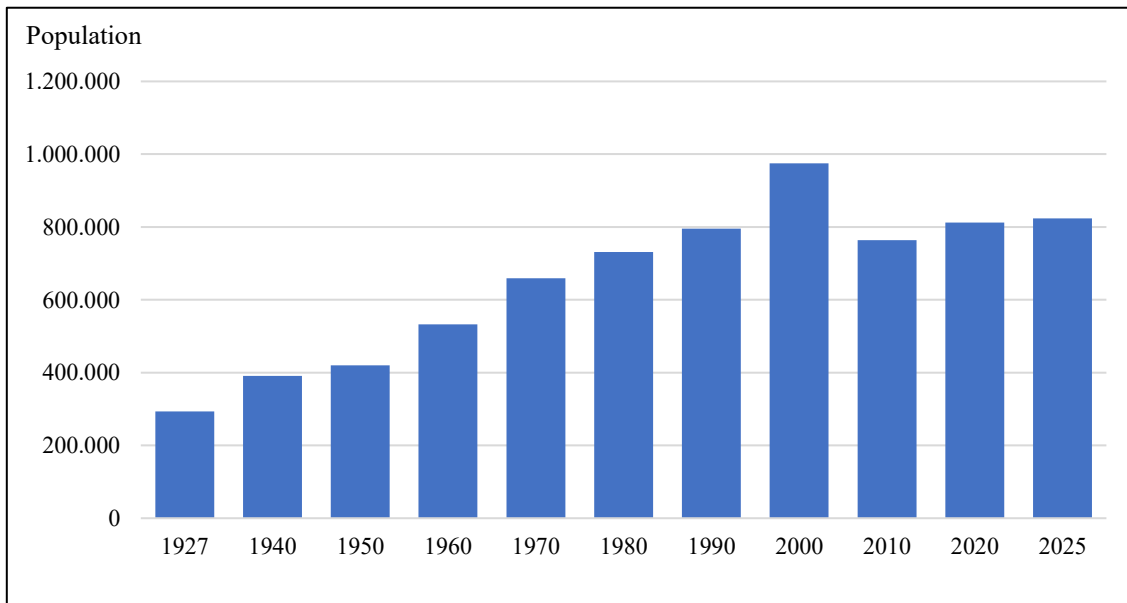


Figure 3. Total Population of Trabzon by Years.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

In this study, a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative research methods was adopted to evaluate the cruise tourism potential of Trabzon province. The research materials consist of national and international literature on cruise tourism, statistical data published by official institutions, and observation and interview data obtained through fieldwork. In order to assess the collected data within a comprehensive framework, SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis—widely used in strategic planning literature—was employed. Through this method, Trabzon's internal dynamics (strengths and weaknesses) and external environmental conditions (opportunities and threats) in the context of cruise tourism were systematically classified and analysed.

In the first phase of the study, academic publications on cruise tourism were systematically reviewed, and a conceptual and theoretical framework was established. In this context, reports, statistical bulletins, and sectoral data published by international organisations such as the Cruise Lines International Association (CLIA) and MedCruise were examined. At the national level, official reports and statistics published by the Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure and relevant port authorities were used as data sources. These secondary data sources constituted the main reference point, particularly in identifying the opportunities and threats within the SWOT analysis.

To enable spatial analysis, Geographic Information Systems (GIS)-based applications were utilised, and the maps included in the study were produced using ArcGIS software. Population data were obtained from the Turkish Statistical Institute (TURKSTAT), while climate data for Trabzon were sourced from the Turkish State Meteorological Service. Within the scope of quantitative analysis, statistical indicators related to cruise ship and passenger movements were evaluated.

In the qualitative data collection process, the Port of Trabzon was examined on-site; the port's physical infrastructure, operational capacity, and functional characteristics were analysed through observational methods. In addition, findings obtained from semi-structured interviews conducted with authorised stakeholders knowledgeable about port operations and planning processes were used to support the interpretation of quantitative data. These qualitative insights provided explanatory data, particularly in identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the port. Thus, the SWOT analysis constituted the methodological backbone of the study as an analytical tool integrating quantitative indicators with field-based findings.

3. HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT AND PHYSICAL STRUCTURE OF THE PORT OF TRABZON

The development of the Port of Trabzon is closely associated with the city's long-standing commercial and transportation activities conducted via the Black Sea. Although the port was initially established in the Moloz area, it was later understood that the current port location was more advantageous in terms of both strategic and physical conditions. Consequently, between 117 and 119 CE, a new harbour area was created by carving the rocks in the area where the Customs Administration is located today (Koday, 1999; Yaşar & Kuban Tokgöz, 2025). This indicates that Trabzon has functioned as a significant centre of regional maritime trade since antiquity.

During the Ottoman period, port and quay activities were concentrated in the old harbour area. In this context, the construction of port and quay facilities initiated by Commander Hasan Pasha was completed in 1903 by Mazhar Pasha, the Governor of Trabzon at the time (Aygün, 2005). During this period, the Port of Trabzon was one of the five most important ports of the Ottoman Empire and played a strategic role within the Black Sea trade network.

In the Republican era, the need for a new port emerged in response to increasing maritime traffic and the demand for modern port infrastructure. The foundation of the new Port of Trabzon was laid on 8 July 1946, and it was completed on 25 June 1954, becoming operational with the docking of the vessel Trabzon. The port continued to operate in this form until 1978; however, in order to accommodate increasing ship traffic and evolving logistical requirements, it underwent a modernisation process. The modernisation works, initiated in 1980, were completed in 1990, resulting in the port's current physical and operational structure (Doğanay, 2014; Trabzon Port,

2026) (Figures 3–4).



Figure 4. The Port of Trabzon in 1952 (Trabzon Port, 2026).



Figure 5. The Port of Trabzon at Present.

Although there are ports and piers of varying scales within the administrative boundaries of Trabzon today, the Port of Trabzon is the only facility with international status that can accommodate large-tonnage vessels. Other coastal structures primarily serve fishing activities and are suitable for small-scale boats. In this respect, the Port of Trabzon constitutes the main focal point for maritime transportation, foreign trade, and logistics activities of the province.

The Port of Trabzon, which holds international status, is an important maritime trade and logistics hub at both regional and national levels. The port has an annual cargo handling capacity of approximately 10 million tonnes and an annual storage capacity of around 5 million tonnes. In terms of container transportation, the port's annual container handling capacity is recorded at 350,000 TEU (TEU: Twenty-foot Equivalent Unit, a standard unit representing a 20-foot container), while its container storage capacity is approximately 300,000 TEU.

The total length of the quays, one of the fundamental components of the port infrastructure, reaches 2,235 metres when all eight berths are considered. Thanks to this physical and operational infrastructure, the Port of Trabzon is capable of serving multiple vessels simultaneously and has the capacity to accommodate an average of 2,500 ships annually. These indicators demonstrate that the Port of Trabzon currently possesses a multifunctional structure capable of efficiently managing dense maritime traffic and providing services for various types of cargo.

Table 3.

Service Capacity of the Port of Trabzon.

Annual Cargo Throughput (Loading and Unloading)	10 million tons
Annual Storage Capacity	5 million tons
Annual Container Throughput	350,000 TEU
Annual Container Storage Capacity	300,000 TEU
Total Berth Length (8 Berths)	2,235 m
Annual Ship Handling Capacity	2,500 vessels

Source: Trabzon Port, 2026.

4. SPATIAL DISTRIBUTION OF CRUISE TOURISM IN THE BLACK SEA BASIN AND THE TEMPORAL ROLE OF THE PORT OF TRABZON

Trabzon stands out as one of the key ports of call within cruise tourism routes established in the Black Sea Basin. In addition to Türkiye, the ports visited by cruise ships in the Black Sea are located within the territories of Georgia, Russia, Ukraine, Romania, and Bulgaria (Figure 5).

However, Türkiye holds a distinct competitive advantage compared to other coastal countries, as it possesses multiple cruise ports along its Black Sea coastline. This situation enables greater route diversification within cruise tourism and contributes to the more active integration of Turkish ports into the regional cruise tourism network.

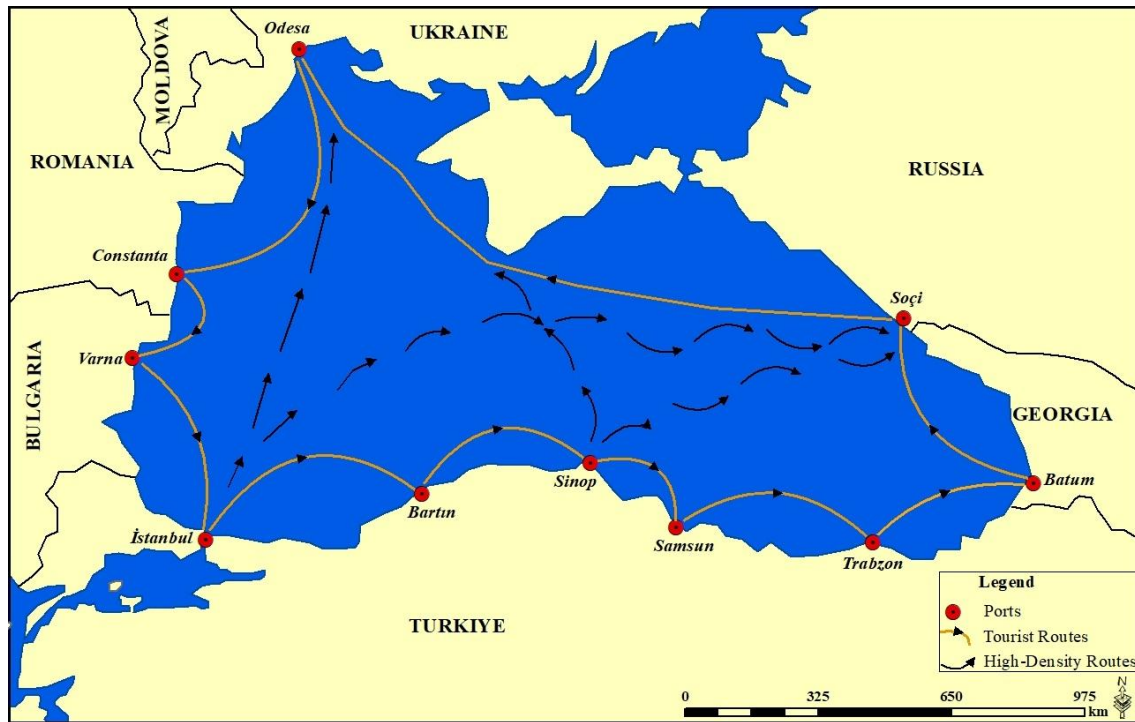


Figure 6. Cruise Ship Ports of Call in the Black Sea (adapted from Bekçi, 2022).

An examination of the annual number of cruise ship calls in the Black Sea cruise tourism reveals a fluctuating development pattern at the regional scale. During the 2011–2014 period, the dominance of Istanbul is particularly notable, while other Black Sea ports such as Trabzon,

Amasra, Samsun, and Sinop emerged as secondary but regularly visited ports of call. In this period, the increase in the number of cruise ships calling at the Port of Trabzon—from 13 to 37—indicates that the city gradually gained greater visibility within the Black Sea cruise itineraries. This increase suggests that Trabzon began to be perceived not only as a port city but also as an attractive destination for cruise tourism, owing to its surrounding natural and cultural attractions.

After 2015, a marked decline in cruise tourism across the Black Sea Basin can be observed. One of the main reasons for this downturn was the temporary suspension of cruise operations in Istanbul following the initiation of the Galataport project in 2015, which weakened the city's central role in the Black Sea cruise itineraries. The interruption of Istanbul's function as a primary hub indirectly affected other port cities in the Black Sea, leading to a decrease in cruise ship calls across the region, including Trabzon. This situation demonstrates that the Black Sea cruise tourism has been largely dependent on Istanbul-centred route planning.

In the subsequent years, the COVID-19 pandemic, which had a global impact, became one of the most significant factors affecting cruise tourism. In 2020 and 2021, cruise operations in the Black Sea came almost to a complete halt, indicating a structural disruption affecting not only Trabzon but all port cities in the region. Travel restrictions, port entry bans, and health and safety concerns during the pandemic period interrupted the continuity of cruise tourism, and no significant differentiation was observed among the ports in the region.

As of 2022, cruise tourism in the Black Sea appears to have entered a recovery phase. During this period of recovery, Trabzon stands out as one of the ports with the highest number of cruise ship calls, reaching 21 and 29 calls in 2023 and 2024, respectively. Although Amasra and Samsun also exhibited an upward trend during the same period, the figures recorded for Trabzon indicate that the city has assumed a more central role within the restructured cruise itineraries in the Black Sea. Data for 2025 further confirm the continuation of this trend, demonstrating that Trabzon has a stable growth potential at the regional scale (Table 4).

Table 4.

Cruise Ship Ports of Call in the Black Sea Region of Türkiye by Years.

Years	Amasra	İstanbul	Samsun	Sinop	Ünye	Trabzon	Total
2011	2	414	2	9	-	13	440
2012	9	377	7	10	-	19	422
2013	15	382	12	16	-	24	449
2014	20	338	16	30	-	37	441
2015	8	343	5	5	-	10	371
2016	2	54	1	2	-	3	62
2017	1	4	-	1	-	1	7
2018	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
2019	-	13	-	-	-	-	13
2020	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
2021	-	9	-	-	-	-	9
2022	8	180	-	14	1	8	211
2023	20	225	4	12	14	21	296
2024	26	204	29	6	-	29	294
2025	31	265	21	1	-	22	340

Source: Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure, 2026.

5. DEVELOPMENT OF CRUISE SHIP CALLS AT THE PORT OF TRABZON AND ITS POSITION IN THE BLACK SEA BASIN

The cruise tourism data for the Port of Trabzon indicate a development process characterised by significant fluctuations and structural disruptions over the 2011–2025 period. Between 2011 and 2014, a steady upward trend was observed in both the number of cruise ships and passenger volume. During this period, the number of ships increased from 13 to 37, while the total number of passengers rose from approximately 6,000 to 16,907 (Table 5). This increase demonstrates that Trabzon gradually gained a stronger position as a transit port of call within the Black Sea cruise itineraries.

The year 2014 represents the peak in terms of both ship calls and passenger numbers. The high values recorded in this year reflect the period during which the Port of Trabzon reached its maximum operational capacity and regional attractiveness in cruise tourism. However, from 2015 onwards, a noticeable stagnation and decline in cruise activities occurred. The decrease in the number of ships from 37 to 10 and the drop in passenger numbers to 2,281 indicate not a structural shift in the Black Sea cruise tourism, but rather a temporary weakening. A key factor behind this decline was the redirection of cruise traffic toward large-scale and central ports following the commencement of the Galataport project in Istanbul.

During the 2016–2017 period, the decline deepened further, with the number of cruise ships calling at the Port of Trabzon decreasing to 3 and 1, respectively, while passenger numbers fell to symbolic levels. Between 2018 and 2021, no cruise ships called at the port, and passenger numbers dropped to zero. This situation clearly reflects the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on cruise tourism at the global scale. In secondary cruise basins such as the Black Sea, this impact appears to have been more prolonged.

As of 2022, a gradual recovery process in cruise activities at the Port of Trabzon began to emerge. In particular, the regular calls of the Russian-based cruise ship *Astoria Grande* played a decisive role in the revival of port traffic (Figure 7). Indeed, cruise tourism, which resumed with eight ships and 4,746 passengers, gained significant momentum in 2023 and 2024. By 2024, the port reached 29 cruise ships and 26,947 passengers, representing the highest level in the post-pandemic period. This increase indicates that Trabzon has regained its position within the Black Sea cruise itineraries and enhanced its visibility within regional tourism networks.

Although a slight decline in ship and passenger numbers is observed in 2025, the levels remain significantly higher than those recorded during the low-activity periods prior to the pandemic. This suggests that, despite its fluctuating trajectory, Trabzon possesses considerable growth potential in cruise tourism.



Figure 7. The Cruise Ship Astoria Grande Calling at Trabzon.

Table 5.

Annual Number of Cruise Ships and Passengers Visiting Trabzon.

Years	Number of Cruise Ship Calls	Number of Cruise Passengers
2011	13	6316
2012	19	7992
2013	24	7784
2014	37	16907
2015	10	2281
2016	3	226
2017	1	103
2018	0	0
2019	0	0
2020	0	0
2021	0	0
2022	8	4746
2023	21	15779
2024	29	26947
2025	22	21839

Source: Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure, 2026.

Trabzon stands out as a prominent tourism geography in the Black Sea region in terms of cruise tourism, owing to the diversity of its natural and cultural attractions. Among the most frequently visited tourist destinations are Uzungöl (95 km), Sümela Monastery (47 km), and Hagia Sophia (5 km) (Figure 6). These sites are positioned within a transportation network centered on the Port of Trabzon and, thanks to their accessibility via main road connections, offer a spatial arrangement suitable for day trips for passengers arriving by cruise ships. Passengers disembarking at the port can reach Hagia Sophia, located close to the city centre, within a short

time; from there, they can be directed southward via the Maçka route to Sümela Monastery or eastward to Uzungöl, located within the boundaries of the Çaykara district.

The continuity and connectivity of the main transportation routes linking these tourist attractions create a visit chain that aligns well with the time-constrained nature of cruise tourism. This situation demonstrates that Trabzon holds a significant competitive advantage in cruise tourism. The possibility of experiencing natural landscapes alongside historical and cultural heritage sites within a single day enhances the city's attractiveness within the Black Sea cruise itineraries and transforms the Port of Trabzon from merely a port of call into a tourism distribution hub integrated with its hinterland.

In addition, other touristic assets across the province—such as highland plateaus (e.g., Hıdırnebi and Kayabaşı), lakes (e.g., Sera Lake and Balıklı Lake), caves (e.g., Çal Cave and Akarsu Cave), museums (e.g., Trabzon City Museum, Kanuni House, and Atatürk Mansion), historic mosques (e.g., İskender Pasha Mosque and Gülbahar Hatun Mosque), churches (e.g., Santa Maria Church and St Anna Church), fountains (e.g., Abdülhamit Fountain and Abdullah Pasha Fountain), bridges (e.g., Zağnos Pasha Bridge and Tabakhane Bridge), inns and baths (e.g., Taşhan and Pasha Bath), and traditional houses (e.g., Memişoğlu Mansion and the houses of Orta Mahalle)—are considered complementary elements that diversify and strengthen Trabzon's cruise tourism potential.

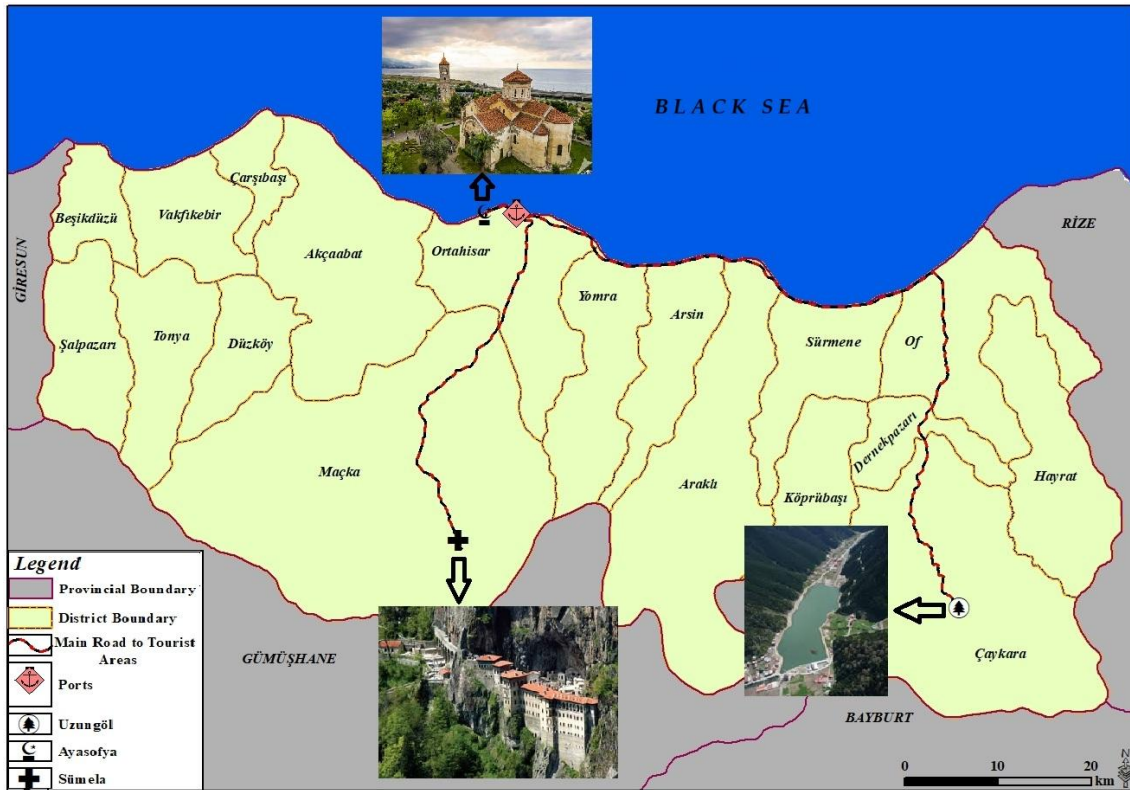


Figure 8. Major Tourist Attractions in Trabzon.

6. SWOT ANALYSIS OF TRABZON'S CRUISE TOURISM POTENTIAL

Trabzon's cruise tourism potential has been evaluated within the framework of SWOT analysis, a method widely used in the strategic planning literature (Pickton & Wright, 1998;

Terrados et al., 2007; Gretzky & Harrison, 2010). Within the scope of the analysis, the strengths and weaknesses constituting the internal dynamics of the city and the port, as well as the opportunities and threats arising from the external environment, were examined through a holistic approach. This evaluation reveals Trabzon's current position within the Black Sea cruise tourism and provides an analytical basis for discussing the destination's future strategic capacity.

The findings indicate that the Port of Trabzon is situated within a significant potential–constraint dilemma. The port's strategic location on the southern coast of the Black Sea, along with Trabzon's strong historical, cultural, and natural attractions, provides a notable competitive advantage. However, the absence of a dedicated cruise terminal and infrastructural deficiencies in accommodating large-tonnage vessels limit the effective utilisation of these advantages. In particular, shortcomings in passenger reception services and structural limitations in port–city integration hinder the comprehensive delivery of the destination experience.

On the other hand, congestion in the Mediterranean Basin and the search for alternative routes by cruise companies create important opportunities for Trabzon. Nevertheless, geopolitical tensions in the Black Sea—particularly between Ukraine and Russia—and the perceived risks related to maritime security constitute major external threats to the continuity of cruise operations. In this context, enhancing Trabzon's competitiveness in cruise tourism requires the coordinated planning of infrastructure investments alongside policies focused on security, sustainability, and destination management. Accordingly, the identified strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats related to Trabzon's cruise tourism potential are summarised in Table 6.

Table 6.

SWOT Analysis of the Port of Trabzon for Cruise Tourism

Strengths	Weaknesses
Strategic Location on the Southern Coast of the Black Sea	The Absence of a Dedicated Cruise Terminal
Accessibility to Rich Historical, Cultural, and Natural Tourism Assets	Insufficient Infrastructure for Large-Tonnage Cruise Ships
The Port's Central Location within the Urban Area	Limited Passenger Handling and Terminal Services
The Historical Identity of a Port City and Its Destination Image	Lack of Coordination in Port–City–Tourism Integration
The Growing Tourism Experience and Service Capacity of the Region	Seasonal Dependence of Cruise Operations
Opportunities	Threats
Diversification Potential of Black Sea Cruise Itineraries	Geopolitical and Military Tensions in the Black Sea
Growing Demand for Alternative Destinations Due to Congestion in the Mediterranean Basin	Maritime Security Risks (e.g., Naval Mines and Unmanned Aerial Vehicles)
Türkiye's Tourism Diversification Policies and Its Efforts to Promote the Black Sea Region	Competition from Other Cruise Ports
Potential Cruise Passenger Demand from Neighboring Regions (Russia and the Caucasus)	Global Economic Fluctuations and Crises
Integration of Cultural and Gastronomy Tourism into Cruise Tourism	Environmental Sustainability and Environmental Pressures

7. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Within the spatial distribution of cruise tourism in the Black Sea Basin, the position, development trajectory, and potential of the Port of Trabzon have been evaluated through a holistic approach in this study. Trabzon's historical identity as a port city, its port located in close proximity to the city centre, and its rich natural and cultural attractions demonstrate that it holds significant value as a cruise tourism destination. In particular, the relative proximity of key attractions such as Sümela Monastery, Uzungöl, and the Hagia Sophia Mosque of Trabzon to the port enables the creation of integrated, day-trip itineraries that align with the time-constrained nature of cruise tourism. This situation points to a spatial advantage that could transform the Port of Trabzon from merely a transit port of call into a tourism distribution hub integrated with its hinterland.

However, ship and passenger statistics for the 2011–2025 period indicate that Trabzon has experienced a fluctuating and fragile development trajectory in cruise tourism. Following the peak levels reached in 2014, Istanbul-centred route changes, geopolitical tensions in the Black Sea, and the global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic have led to significant declines in cruise activities. Although the recovery trend observed after 2022 suggests that Trabzon has regained visibility within the Black Sea cruise network and maintained its potential, this increase does not yet represent a structural and sustainable growth pattern. This situation indicates that the city remains highly dependent on external factors in the context of cruise tourism.

The results of the SWOT analysis reveal that, despite its strong attraction factors and strategic location advantages, Trabzon faces structural limitations in terms of infrastructure and governance. The absence of a dedicated cruise terminal, deficiencies in technical equipment for accommodating large-tonnage vessels, and insufficient coordination in port–city–tourism integration hinder the delivery of a comprehensive and high-quality destination experience. On the other hand, increasing demand for alternative routes due to congestion in the Mediterranean Basin, Türkiye's tourism diversification policies, and the re-emergence of the Black Sea as a tourism region present significant opportunities for Trabzon.

In order to enhance Trabzon's competitiveness in cruise tourism, it is essential to prioritise the planning of an independent cruise terminal that meets international standards and to develop port infrastructure capable of accommodating large-scale vessels. In addition, strengthening port–city integration, improving transportation connectivity, and designing thematic, short-duration, high-value-added tour programmes for cruise passengers are of critical importance. Furthermore, the development of regional route collaborations, the updating of security and crisis management strategies, and the promotion of environmentally sustainable practices will be decisive in shaping Trabzon's long-term positioning. In this context, if a planned and integrated strategy is implemented, it can be argued that the Port of Trabzon has the potential to evolve into a stable, sustainable, and competitive cruise destination within the Black Sea Basin.

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