

The Role of a Global Sports Event in Sports Geography, Sports Tourism and Destination Branding: The Case of “Kaçkar by UTMB” as the First UTMB Event Held in Türkiye*

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Abstract

The Kaçkar Mountains, the highest and most distinctive range in Türkiye's Eastern Black Sea Region, occupy a notable place in the ecotourism literature owing to their biodiversity, glacial lakes formed by Pleistocene glaciation, and traditional highland (yayla) culture. This study examines “Kaçkar by UTMB” - the Turkish leg of the Ultra-Trail du Mont-Blanc World Series - from the perspectives of sports geography, sport tourism, regional development, and destination branding. A qualitative design combining document analysis with field observation was adopted, and the race routes were inventoried through fieldwork and geographic location data. Held in Rize/Çamlıhemşin on 26-28 September 2025, the event brought together 1,285 athletes from 55 countries. The analysis covers the organisation's technical structure, the 20KM and 50KM route inventories, the 100KM course scheduled for 2026, climatic conditions, and the event's economic effects on the region. The findings indicate that the routes link 12 strategic highland settlements, thereby integrating the region's biocultural heritage with sport tourism, and that the event raised accommodation occupancy during the off-season, easing the destination's seasonality problem. A female participation rate of 35% is discussed as a preliminary indicator of the destination's accessibility and inclusiveness. The vision of the Kaçkar Mountains as the “Chamonix of the North” is finally evaluated in relation to the strategic initiatives of the Ministry of Youth and Sports and the Governorship of Rize, and to carrying-capacity and sustainability principles. Deepening local participation and establishing GIS-based monitoring systems are recommended.

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Küresel Ölçekte Bir Spor Organizasyonunun Spor Coğrafyası, Spor Turizmi ve Destinasyon Markalaşması Açısından Değerlendirilmesi: Türkiye’de İlk Kez Düzenlenen “Kaçkar by UTMB” Örneği*

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Öz

Doğu Karadeniz Bölgesi’nin en yüksek ve en karakteristik sıradağları olan Kaçkar Dağları, zengin biyolojik çeşitliliği, Pleyistosen buzullaşmasının izlerini taşıyan buzul gölleri ve özgün yayla kültürü ile ekoturizm literatüründe müstesna bir yere sahiptir. Bu çalışma, dünyanın en prestijli ultra maraton serisi olan Ultra-Trail du Mont-Blanc (UTMB) Dünya Serisi’nin Türkiye ayağı olan “Kaçkar by UTMB” organizasyonunu spor coğrafyası, spor turizmi, bölgesel kalkınma ve destinasyon markalaşması perspektifinden incelemektedir. Araştırmada doküman analizi ve arazi gözlemlerine dayalı nitel bir yaklaşım benimsenmiş; parkur güzergâhları arazi çalışmaları ve coğrafi konum verileriyle kayıt altına alınmıştır. 26-28 Eylül 2025 tarihlerinde Rize/Çamlıhemşin merkezli gerçekleştirilen etkinlik, 55 ülkeden 1.285 sporcuyu Kaçkarların zorlu parkurlarında bir araya getirmiştir. Çalışmada organizasyonun teknik detayları, 20KM ve 50KM parkur envanterleri ile 2026 yılında koşulacak 100KM güzergâhı, iklimsel veriler ve bölge ekonomisine olan etkileri akademik bir dille analiz edilmiştir. Bulgular, güzergâhların 12 stratejik yayla yerleşimini birbirine bağlayarak biyokültürel mirası spor turizmiyle bütünleştirdiğini; etkinliğin sezon dışı dönemde konaklama doluluk oranlarını artırarak mevsimsellik sorununu hafiflettiğini göstermektedir. Kadın katılım oranının %35’e ulaşması, destinasyonun erişilebilir ve kapsayıcı imajını destekleyen ampirik bir gösterge olarak değerlendirilmiştir. Sonuç olarak Kaçkar Dağları’nın “Kuzeyin Chamonix’i” olma vizyonu, Gençlik ve Spor Bakanlığı ile Rize Valiliği’nin stratejik hamleleri, taşıma kapasitesi ve sürdürülebilirlik ilkeleri ışığında tartışılmakta; yerel katılımın derinleştirilmesi ve CBS tabanlı izleme sistemlerinin kurulması önerilmektedir.

INTRODUCTION

Conceptual Framework: Sports Tourism and Destination Management

Although sports tourism has a long history dating back to the ancient Olympic Games, it acquired its modern character - both conceptually and industrially - in the late 19th century (Standeven and De Knop, 1999). The conceptualization of sports tourism in the modern sense has required not only participation in sports activities but also consideration of the spatial, temporal and behavioral dimensions of tourism associated with these activities (Gibson et al., 2012). The regulation of working hours following the Industrial Revolution, the emergence of the concept of leisure time and the development of transportation infrastructure (particularly railroads) made it easier for the masses to travel to watch sporting events or to participate in these activities themselves.

By the second half of the 20th century, however, the homogenization of mass tourism and the environmental damage it caused had triggered a search for alternative forms of tourism. This transformation has led to sports events being viewed not merely as a complementary activity within the tourism system, but as an independent form of tourism that diversifies the demand structure of destinations (Getz and McConnell, 2014). During this process, sports tourism has secured a prominent place in the academic literature, classified into “active sports tourism” - encompassing participatory activities such as mountaineering, running and skiing - “event sports tourism”, which includes mega-events such as the Olympics and World Cups, and “nostalgic sports tourism”, which refers to attractions linked to sports history (Gibson, 1998). Today, sports tourism has evolved into a niche, sustainable and nature-focused macro-industry by merging with trends towards a return to nature and the philosophy of regenerative tourism (Weed and Bull, 2012).

Sports tourism is recognized as a strategic tool for destinations to overcome the challenge of seasonality, broaden the base of economic revenue and reposition their brand image (Higham and Hinch, 2018). Furthermore, sports events held outside the main tourism season have the potential to reduce the seasonal vulnerability of destinations by spreading visitor flows throughout the year (Higham and Hinch, 2002). In particular, mega or niche sports events held in protected natural areas attract an environmentally conscious, active and experience-oriented tourist profile to the region, rather than one based on a passive approach to tourism (Gibson, 2006). The destination branding process is not merely about promoting a region; it is also about positioning it competitively through identity, image, stakeholder collaboration and perceived value (Blain, Levy and Ritchie, 2005; Cai, 2002). In this regard, collaborating with globally recognized sports brands directly enhances the perceived quality and competitive strength of the destination in the international market (Pike, 2020). In this process, sports events have the potential to function as a strategic co-branding tool that increases the visibility of the destination brand and establishes a symbolic link between the region and its sporting identity (Ramos et al., 2026). In this context, showcasing intangible cultural heritage and natural assets on a global stage through niche sporting events aligns directly with the Sustainable Development Goals (Eastern Black Sea Development Agency, 2026).

The designation of sports tourism as a strategic sector in the 11th and 12th Development Plans of Türkiye has encouraged the effective use of such natural resources. From a destination management perspective, “Kaçkar by UTMB” is not just a race; it is a process through which the region is establishing itself as an “outdoor brand” on the international stage.

The Kaçkar Mountains and Çamlıhemşin’s Place in the Literature

The Kaçkar Mountains (3,937 m), located within the Alpine-Himalayan orogenic belt, are one of the regions that most clearly bear traces of Pleistocene glaciation. In academic studies, the Kaçkar Mountains are designated as a “Biodiversity Hotspot” and an “Important Plant Area”. With approximately 2,500 plant taxa, the region constitutes one of the richest sections of the Euro-Siberian

phytogeographic region (Rize Provincial Directorate of Culture and Tourism, 2025). The development of glaciation in the mountainous areas of the Eastern Black Sea, which is related to aspect, elevation and topographic location (Geçen et al., 2018), also provides a geomorphological explanation for the technical difficulty level of the Kaçkar trails.

The Çamlıhemşin basin, meanwhile, is a focal point for ecotourism research due to the “traditional highland culture” (transhumance) shaped along the Fırtına Valley axis and its endemic flora. Since the success of branding in rural and mountainous destinations depends on the integration of local cultural elements, the natural landscape and collaboration among stakeholders into a shared destination narrative (Cai, 2002), Haberal (2024) has detailed the high potential of the region in terms of nature tourism, highland culture and protected area management through field inventories. In particular, the architectural fabric of traditional highland settlements and the recreational use of these areas are of critical importance for sustainable tourism planning (Figure 1).

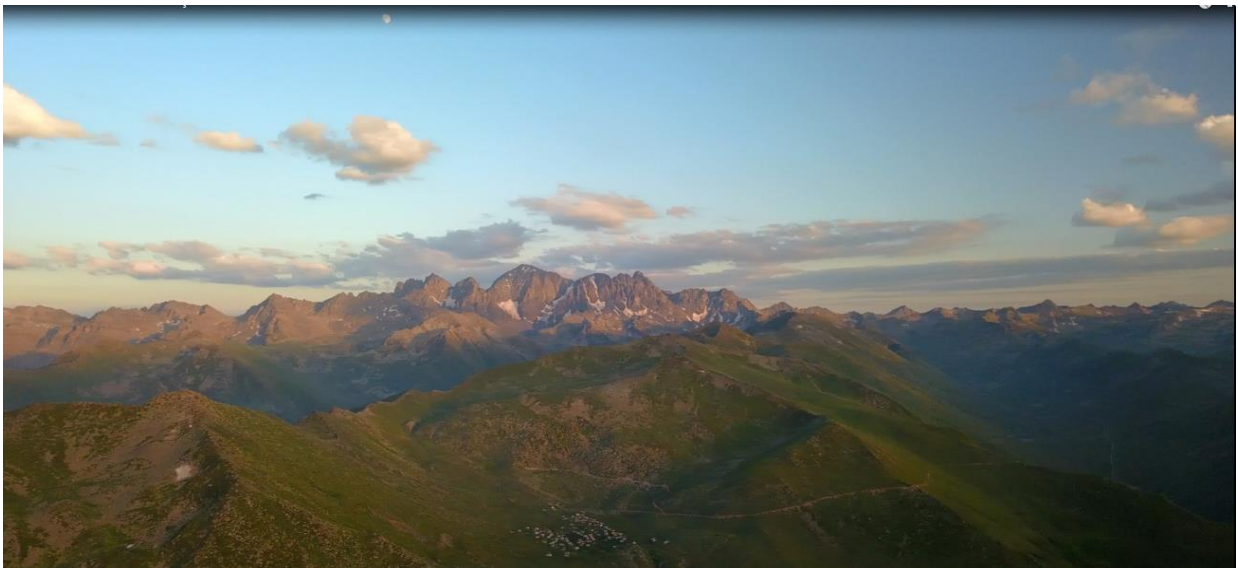


Figure 1. A view of one of the peaks of Mount Kaçkar, where the UTMB races - held for the first time in Türkiye - took place (Source: Authors)

The Birth of a Global Brand and the Vision of the UTMB (Ultra-Trail du Mont-Blanc)

Recognized as the global pinnacle of trail running and ultra-marathon disciplines, the UTMB was launched in 2003 in the town of Chamonix, France, by a group of visionary organizers led by Michel and Catherine Poletti (Mayer, 2023). Beginning in its first year with 722 entrants on a course of more than 150 kilometres around the iconic Mont Blanc massif in the Alps - spanning the territories of France, Italy and Switzerland - this event has, over time, become the most prestigious mountain race in the world; the number of entrants doubled in the following year, and by the middle of the decade the entry quota was being filled within months of registration opening (Mayer, 2023).

The historical turning points of the UTMB can be chronologically categorized into three main periods:

2003-2009 (institutionalization period): As the number of participants grew rapidly, new subcategories such as the CCC (Courmayeur-Champex-Chamonix, 101 km) and the TDS were added, transforming the event into a “trail running festival” (Mayer, 2023).

2014 (international standards): To ensure the quality and safety of the race, the ITRA

(International Trail Running Association) scoring system and a qualified entry (lottery) system were implemented.

2021-2022 (globalization and partnership): The “UTMB World Series” was established following the strategic partnership of the UTMB Group with The Ironman Group, a global sports organizer. With this move, the main race in Chamonix was positioned as a “World Final”, while “Majors” and “Events” stages were designated worldwide where participants can earn points (Running Stones) to qualify for the finals (Outside Details, 2025).

“Kaçkar by UTMB”, the Turkish branch of the organization, is at the heart of the strategy to include the Kaçkar Mountains in the global category of “iconic mountains”. As seen in the example of Chamonix, the association of a region with mountain sports drives year-round tourism to that area. Since the route, landscape and local experience are decisive factors in the perception of a destination by ultra-marathon participants (Hinch and Kono, 2018), the Kaçkar vision aims to transform the Kaçkar Mountains from merely a local tourist destination into a global centre for outdoor sports.

FIELD ANALYSIS: GEOGRAPHICAL AND CLIMATIC CHARACTERISTICS

The Relationship Between Climatic Conditions and Athlete Performance

The Kaçkar Mountains offer a variable thermal comfort zone for athletes because they serve as a transition zone between a “high-mountain climate” and a “humid maritime climate”. This climatic diversity directly affects every detail, from the equipment selection of athletes to their nutrition strategies. Although the annual average temperature in the region hovers around 20 °C, these values drop as low as 3 °C during the winter months.

Inventory of Topographic Features, Flora and Fauna

The race courses wind through the untouched trails, glacial lakes and unique alpine vegetation of the Kaçkar Mountains. Located within the boundaries of Kaçkar Mountains National Park, these routes are not merely physical paths; they also serve as a fundamental component of the tourism product that shapes participant motivation, sense of place and destination experience by offering participants the opportunity to traverse glacial valleys and run on alpine terrain (Rize Provincial Directorate of Culture and Tourism, 2025; Getz and McConnell, 2014). In addition, the foothills of Mount Altıparmak and the Lakes Region offer ultra-marathon runners both technical challenges and high visual motivation (Kaçkar 100K Report, 2026).

The designated ultra-marathon routes go beyond being mere athletic performance paths; they connect 12 strategic highland settlements that embody the tangible and intangible biocultural heritage of the region and were shaped over time by shepherds and the local population. Surrounded by stone and timber-framed houses - which represent some of the most distinctive examples of traditional Black Sea architecture - these ancient transhumance (mountain pasture migration) routes have been integrated with the active dynamism offered by sports tourism. Thus, these highland pastures not only provide participants with a physical challenge but also serve as dynamic open-air museums and living cultural landscapes where the local way of life, authentic rituals and the integrity of the landscape can be experienced firsthand.

ORGANIZATIONAL METHODOLOGY AND TECHNICAL DETAILS

A sustainable business model for trail running events depends not only on race-day operations but also on the continuity of the stakeholder network, logistical capacity, volunteer management and communication with local institutions (Perić and Slavić, 2019). “Kaçkar by UTMB” has been designed with a safety, logistics and medical network that meets international standards. Conducted under the coordination of the General Directorate of International Organizations and Foreign Relations of the

Ministry of Youth and Sports, the process was managed with a professional, corporate approach aimed at creating long-term brand value for the region.

Course Categorization and Technical Data

As part of the event, three main distance categories, each of which awards UTMB World Series qualification points (Running Stones), have been established to cater to the kinematic and physical capabilities of athletes of all levels (UTMB World Series, 2026a). For the 2026 edition, a fourth and much shorter course, Ayder 4KM, starting and finishing at Ayder Plateau, has additionally been included in the programme. The official technical specifications of the three main courses are presented in (Table 1).

Table 1. Official technical specifications of the Kaçkar by UTMB courses (2026 edition)

Course	Distance	Elevation gain	Max. allowed time	Start (Ayder)	Running Stones
Kaçkar 100KM	82 km	5,600 m+	24 h	04:00	3
Kaçkar 50KM	44 km	3,000 m+	12 h 30 min	08:00	2
Kaçkar 20KM	20 km	1,400 m+	6 h	10:00	1

Source: Compiled by the authors from the official race pages of Kaçkar by UTMB (UTMB World Series, 2026a).

Kaçkar 20KM (Fırtına Valley Stage)

Designed as the entry-level, speed-focused course of the organization, this route covers 20 km with an elevation gain of 1,400 m and a maximum allowed race time of six hours (UTMB World Series, 2026b). Its relatively low elevation gain makes it suitable for a wide range of participants with varying fitness levels. Set within the globally recognized ecosystem of the Fırtına Valley basin and its unique and rich endemic flora, this route offers athletes a competitive experience in corridors of high biodiversity. Starting from Ayder Plateau, the main logistics hub, the route passes through the Gunc, Sochi, Dobaye, Taşlık, Haçizeni, Lower Avusor, Peryatak and Çamyatak plateaus in succession before reaching Huser Plateau. After turning back at Orenda Cafe - one of the commercial establishments located along the Kaçkar Plateaus and Koçdüzü road route at Huser Peak - the route continues downhill, passing through Günbatımı Cafe and Huser Sis Denizi Cafe in succession. It then follows the Ayder trail, shifting to a descent for the 20KM course, passing through the upper elevation of the Ayder Plateau settlement and ending at the finish line in the Galegon area. Encompassing the highland settlements of the region, which are distinctive from both ecological and sociocultural perspectives, this course serves as a technically accessible destination trail with high visual appeal and scenic value for both beginners in outdoor sports and speed-oriented athletes (Figures 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7).



Figure 2. The Galegon area of Ayder Plateau is one of the campsites where athletes participating in the UTMB races set up camp (Source: Authors)



Figure 3. A view of the Lower Avusor Plateau along the 20KM run (Source: Authors)

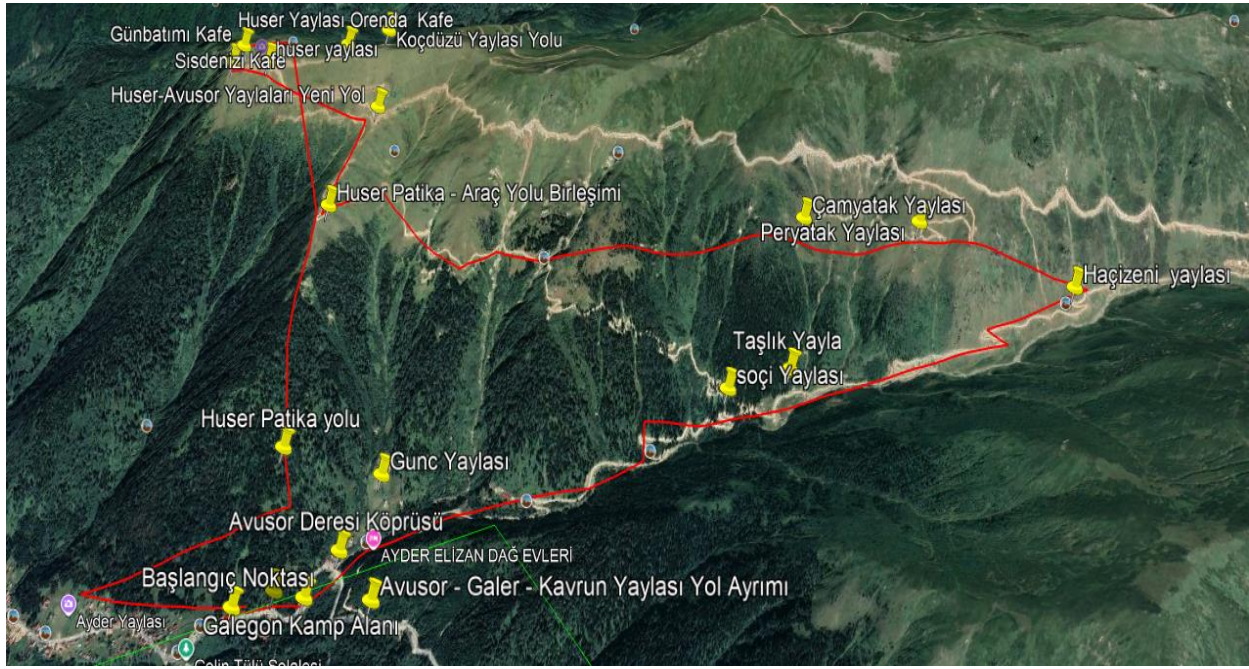


Figure 4. Google Earth map of the 20KM running route (Source: Authors)

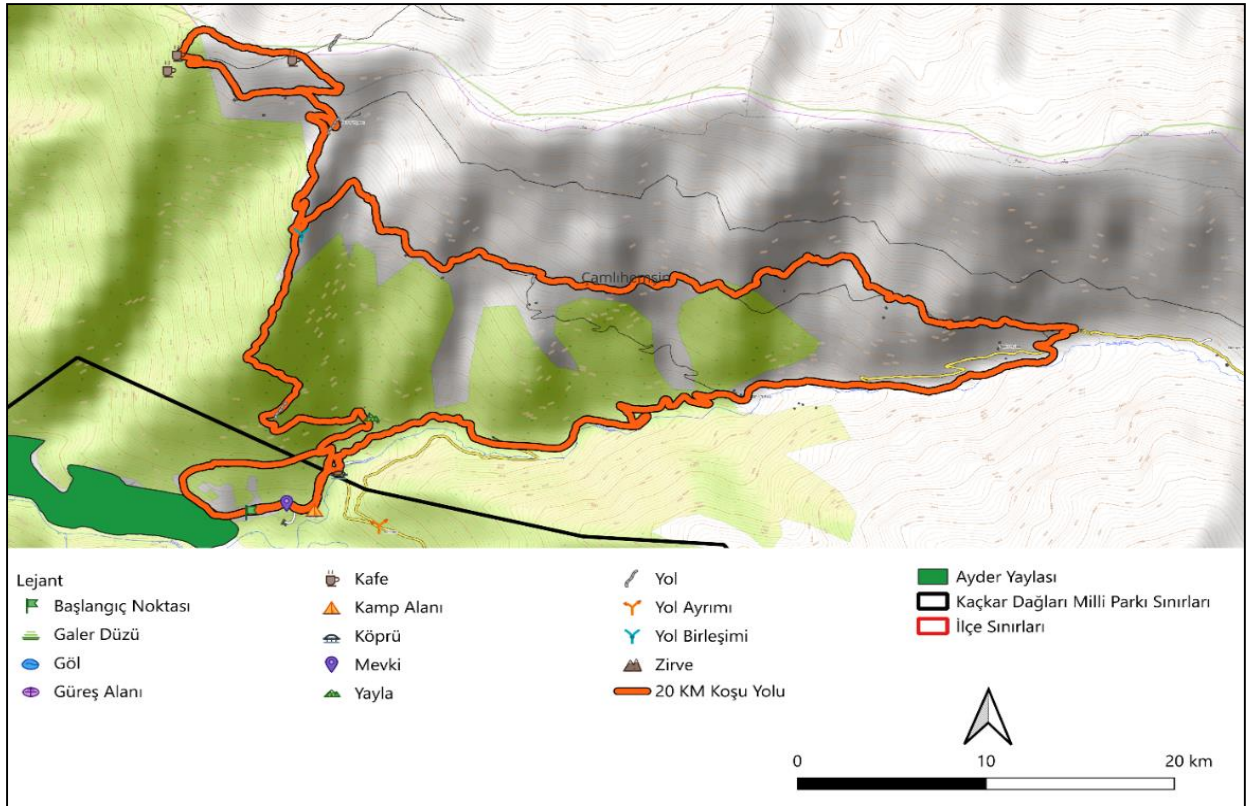
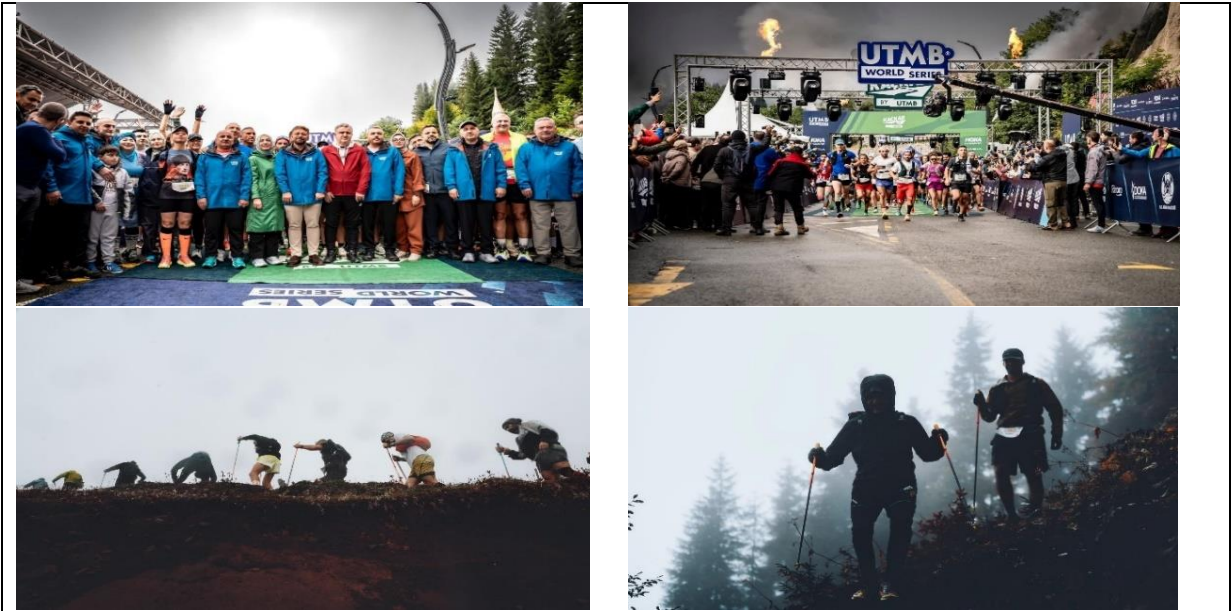


Figure 5. The 20KM running route (Source: Authors)



Figure 6. Views of geographical features along the trail (Peryatak Plateau - Lower and Upper Avusor Plateaus - a view of the Kemerli Kaçkar and Altıparmak Mountains) (Source: Authors)



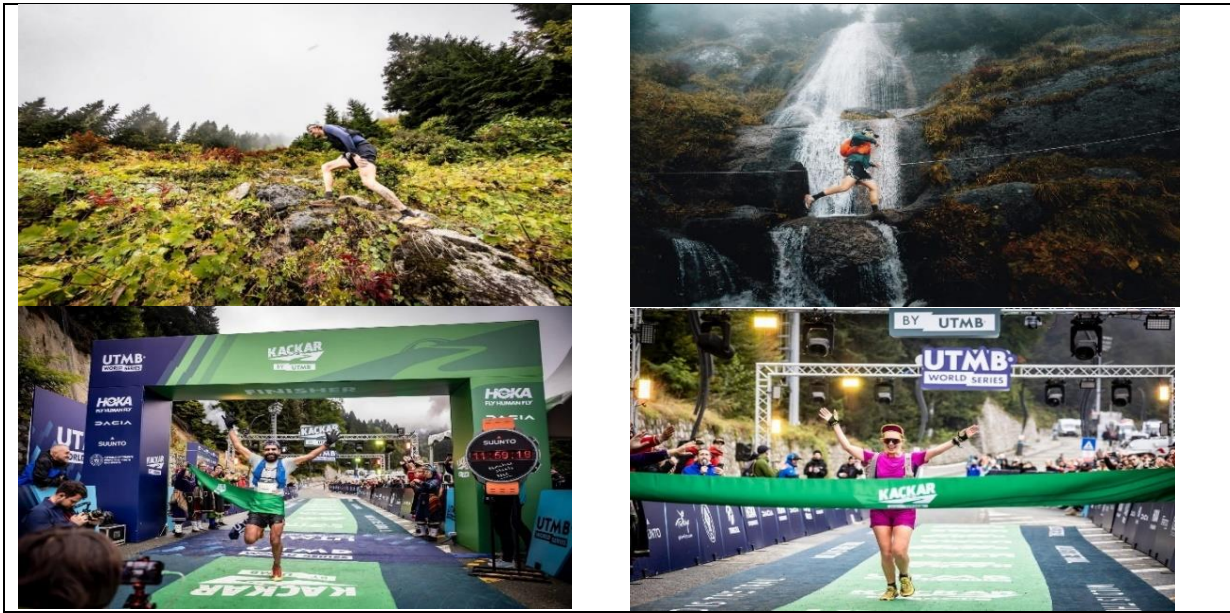


Figure 7. Various photographs from the 20KM run (Source: Çamlıhemşin District Governor’s Office)

Kaçkar 50KM (The Glacier Peak)

With its advanced technical terrain, active glacial valleys and cirque lakes, this stage is the most distinctive mid-distance, endurance-focused leg of the organization; it covers 44 km with an elevation gain of over 3,000 m and a maximum allowed race time of 12 hours and 30 minutes (UTMB World Series, 2026b). Starting from the Galegon area near Ayder Plateau - the main logistics hub - this route proceeds along the old Ayder-Huser Plateaus trail to reach Huser Plateau. From Sis Denizi Cafe and Gün Batımı Cafe - commercial establishments located along the route to the Kaçkar Plateaus and Koçdüzü at Huser Peak - and Orenda Cafe, the course turns back via the Koçdüzü route at Huser Peak, passing through the Çamyatak, Peryatak, Upper Avusor, Haçizeni, Taşlık and Dobaye highlands, and after passing through Gunç Plateau via the old trail along the Çise Restaurant route, the trail continues across the Avusor Creek. From this point onward, the route proceeds in sequence through Kedenoc, Gizlipuğar, Sevdalı Kaya, Tozkaban and Pilunçut, and finally reaches Galerüzü. Here, after passing the Yusufun Yeri Lodging Centre, the route ascends to Hasbıçak, Mayledüzü and Lower and Upper Çeymakçur; from there, it descends along the same route to the Lower Çeymakçur Plateau and reaches the Palakçur Plateau. The race course then ends in the areas of Mezarlıklar, Mayk, Şeparkluğun Düzü, Hasbıçak and Galegon (Figure 8).



Figure 8. A view from the Günbatımı Cafe on Huser Plateau, used in the Kaçkar by UTMB races
(Source: Authors)

These highland settlements are strategic focal points that boast not only their own unique ecological and microclimatic characteristics but also a deep-rooted sociocultural history. In the later stages of the route, where elevation and technical difficulty increase, the course passes through areas with alpine meadow ecosystems - such as Çeymakçur, Palakçur and Galer Düzü - which are among the most iconic and highest-elevation regions of the Kaçkar Mountains. This challenging route, which takes athletes all the way to the foothills of the Altıparmak Mountains and the Kaçkar massif, passes directly through the vicinity of active glacial morphology, offering a technical competition course at high altitude. In this regard, the stage provides an extreme performance arena for elite mountain runners and endurance athletes, while also serving as a strategic backbone destination that combines the most prestigious biodiversity and geomorphological features of Kaçkar Mountains National Park (Figures 9, 10 and 11).

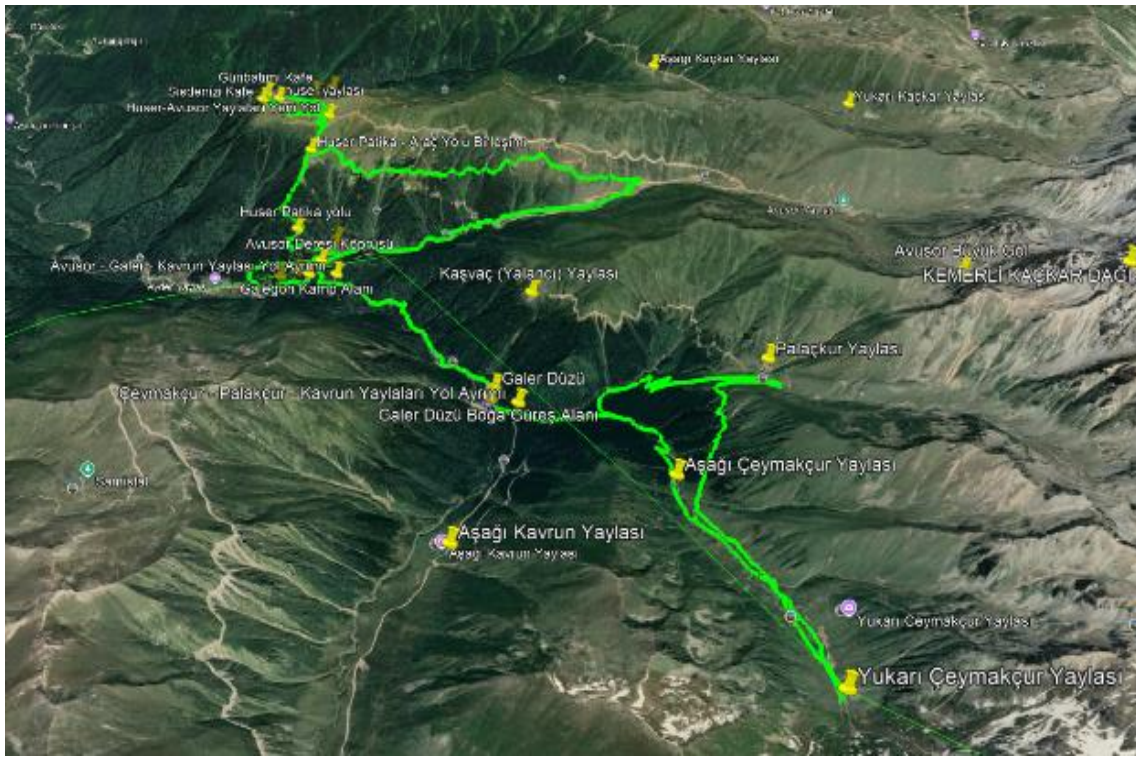


Figure 9. Google Earth map of the 50KM running route (Source: Authors)

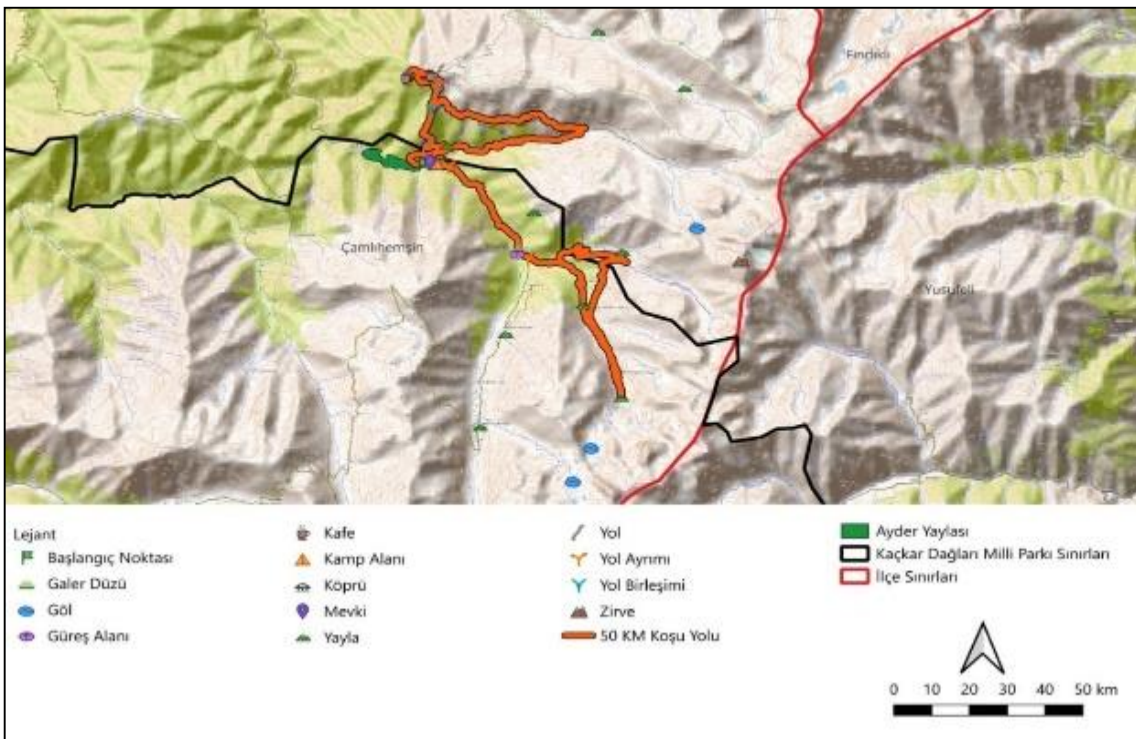


Figure 10. The 50KM running route (Source: Authors)

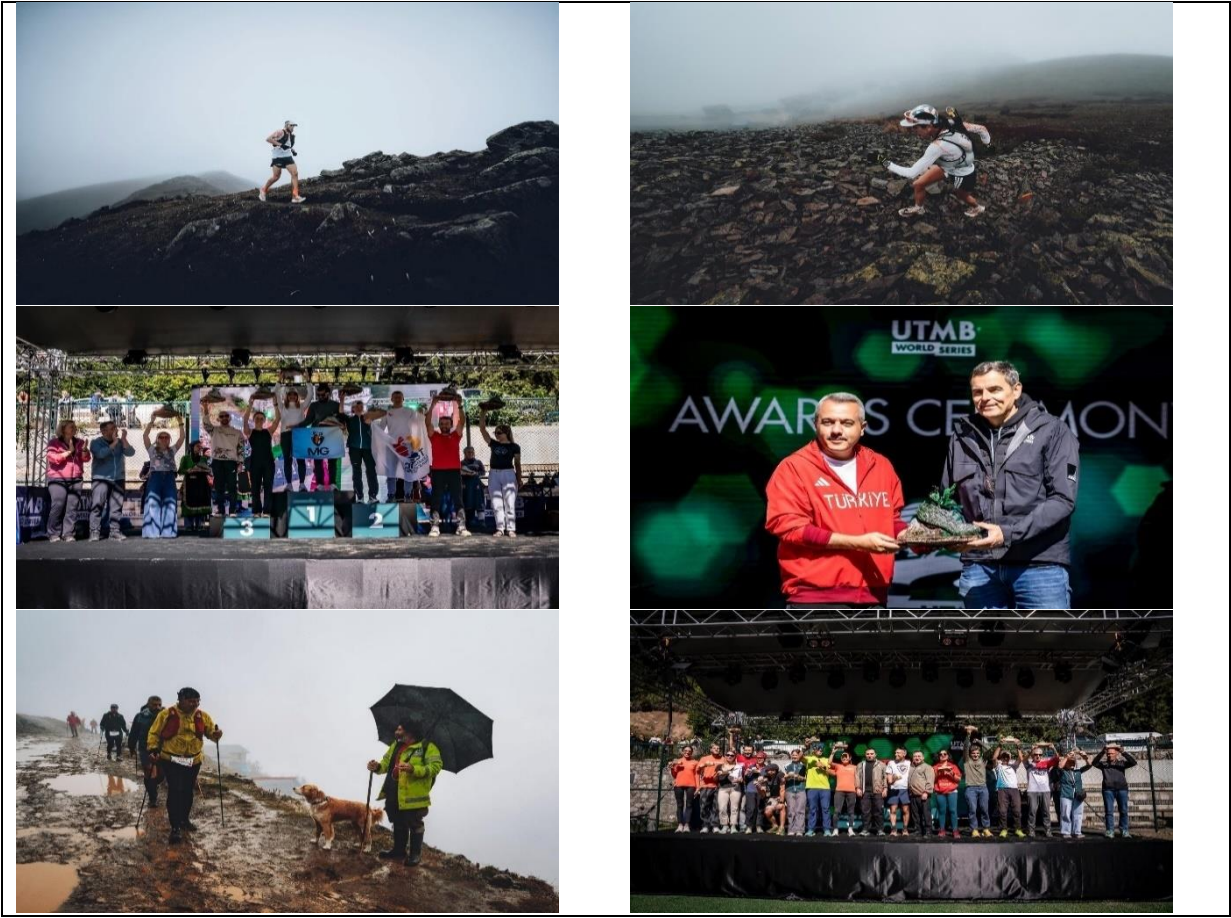


Figure 11. The 50KM race route and race photographs (Map sources: Authors; race route photographs: Çamlıhemşin District Governor's Office)

Kaçkar 100KM (The Great Kaçkar)

Considered the most prestigious and iconic leg of the event, this stage is a large-scale route that connects the 12 strategic highland settlements of the region via ancient trail networks. Starting from the town centre of Ayder, the route ascends a challenging slope from the hot spring outlet just below the Ayder Haşimoğlu Hotel to reach the Hazındağ highland. Supply stations for athletes are located here. The route then continues along another challenging trail to the Samistal highlands. Further along, the Kaçkar Kavrın Mountain Huts in the Upper Kavrın highland and the Şahin Guesthouse serve as important supply, lodging and camping areas for athletes and spectators along the course. From there, the route proceeds via the Derebaşı Lake route to the Mezovit campground. From here, the route continues south-eastward with a difficult climb, reaching the Kavrın Büyük Deniz Lakes Pass. The route then turns eastward, descending to Karadeniz Lake. From there, the trail continues downhill along a path connecting to the Upper Çeymakçur Plateau, and from the eastern side of the Lower Çeymakçur Plateau it reaches the Palakçur Plateau. Further along the trail, the route passes through Şeparkluğun Düzü, Mayk, the plateau cemeteries, Sela Pass, Avusor Pass and Pişovit Pass, heading towards the Avusor Great Glacial Lake basin from the foothills of Kemerli Kaçkar Mountain. Continuing its descent from the lake towards Avusor Plateau, the trail then turns eastward again, ascending through the Dadala area to Didingola and Koçdüzü Plateau, and finally reaching Sataple Düzü to the west. From here, the route continues along

the Upper and Lower Kaçkar route to reach Orenda Cafe at the summit of Huser Plateau. From this point, the trail begins its descent, passing Günbatımı Cafe and Huser Sis Denizi Cafe in succession, then following the old historic trail between the Huser and Ayder Plateaus to reach the centre of Ayder Plateau and finally arrive at the Galegon area.

According to the official technical data, the course measures 82 km with a cumulative elevation gain of 5,600 m and a maximum allowed race time of 24 hours, which places it among the most demanding courses in the 100K category of the UTMB World Series (UTMB World Series, 2026b). Designed with international elite athletes in mind, this stage offers a performance arena that demands top-level technical endurance - set in the shadow of the Kaçkar mountain range, around high-altitude cirque lakes and across extreme alpine terrain, with passes exceeding 3,000 m. Cancelled in the inaugural edition for the reasons set out in the findings below, the course will be contested for the first time on 12 September 2026. From a destination branding perspective, the inclusion of this course on the calendar represents a strategic turning point that will elevate the position of the Kaçkar Mountains in the international extreme sports tourism market to the highest level. Along the 20KM, 50KM and 100KM running routes in the Kaçkar Mountains of the Eastern Black Sea region, runners and spectators are treated to a display of uniquely beautiful highlands, glacial lakes, campsites and many other fascinating geographical features that reflect the topography of the region (Figures 12-24).



Figure 12. Koçdüzü Plateau and Altıparmak Mountain along the 100KM route (Source: Authors)

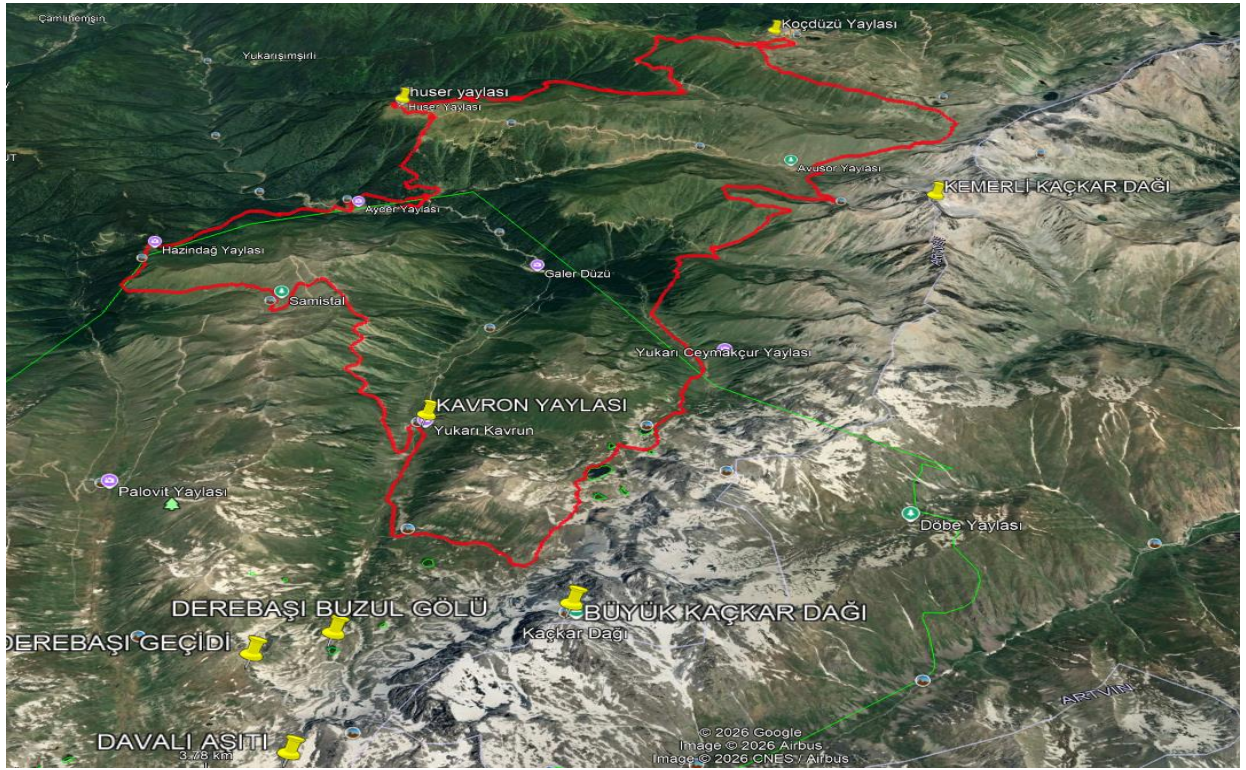


Figure 13. Google Earth map of the 100KM running route (Source: Authors)

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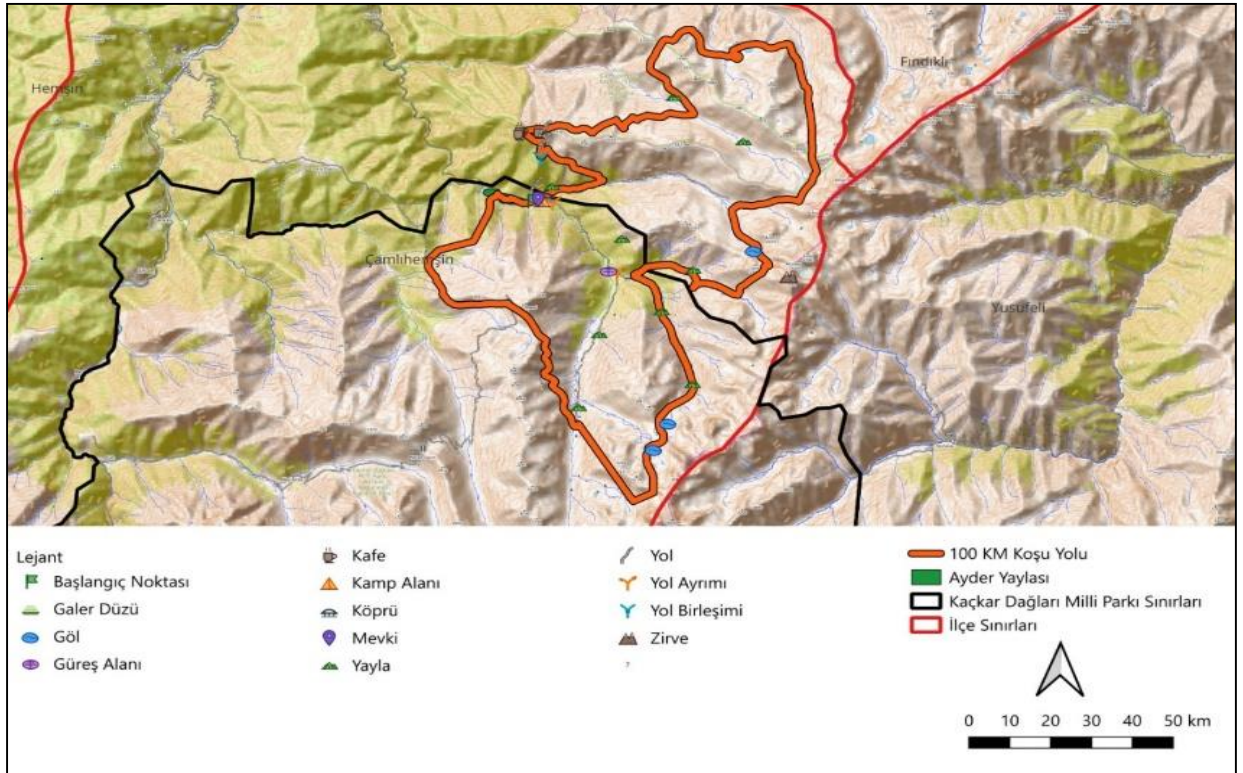


Figure 14. The 100KM running route (Source: Authors)



Figure 15. View of the Kaçkar Mountains, where the UTMB races take place (Source: Authors)



Figure 16. A view of the historic cobblestone road that forms part of the 100 km race route (Source: Authors)



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Figure 17. The Büyük Kaçkar Peak - Mezovit campsite along the 100 km run route (Source: Authors)



Figure 18. Didingola Plateau and Altıparmak Mountain along the route of the 100 km run (Source: Authors)



Figure 19. View of the Kaçkarlar - Kavrun - Çeymakçur Plateaus Valley along the 50 km and 100 km race routes (Source: Authors)



Figure 20. The Çeymakçur - Palakçur - Kaşvaç Plateaus Valley, located along the 50 km and 100 km race routes (Source: Authors)



Figure 21. Lower Çeymakçur Plateau, located along the 50 km and 100 km race routes (Source: Authors)



Figure 22. View of the Ayder Valley, where all the races take place, and of the Huser Plateau from the Samistal Peak (Source: Authors)



Figure 23. A view of the Black Sea glacial lake, offering a visual feast to runners and spectators along the 100 km race route (Source: Authors)



Figure 24. A view of the Avusor large glacial lake located along the 100 km route (Source: Authors)

Participant Profile and Analysis of Global Participation

Athletes from 55 different countries participated in the races. This demographic diversity presents a strategic opportunity to increase the international recognition of the Kaçkar Mountains and enhance the visibility of the destination (UTMB World Series, 2026a).

- **Total participants:** 1,285 active athletes (the number of registered participants and applicants approached 2,000).
- **Gender breakdown:** 65% male / 35% female.

It should be noted that the participation figures given in organizational and press communications differ according to whether registered entrants, starters or finishers are counted; the figures reported above refer to athletes who actually started the races, and the official results database should be consulted for finisher counts by category (UTMB World Series, 2026c).

While the global participation rate of women in mountain and ultra-marathon sports is generally reported in the literature to remain within the 20-25% range, the fact that this rate reached 35% at Kaçkar by UTMB is one of the most significant empirical findings supporting the image of the region as safe, accessible, sustainable and inclusive in the international market. Since this observation rests on a single edition, however, it should be interpreted as a preliminary indicator requiring confirmation across successive editions.

Event Programme and Chronological Flow

This section summarizes the chronological flow and operational details of the three-day programme of the second edition of the event, scheduled for 11-13 September 2026. Designed to ensure that participants experience the event with maximum efficiency, the programme includes racing competitions and concurrent social and commercial activities (side events). The start and finish points of the Kaçkar 100KM, Kaçkar 50KM and Kaçkar 20KM courses have been designated as Ayder Plateau on the basis of logistical and geographical suitability (Figure 25).

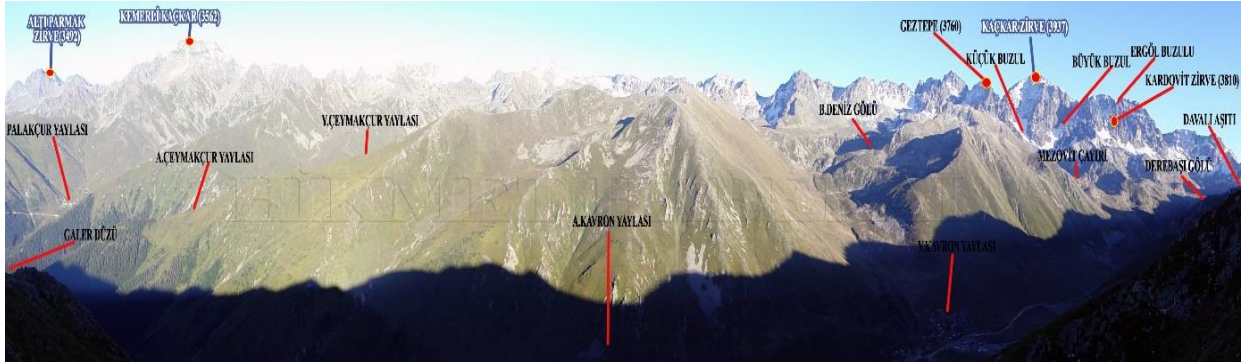


Figure 25. The Kaçkar mountain range, where the 20KM, 50KM and 100KM courses are run (Source: Authors)

Day 1: Friday, 11 September 2026 (Preparation and Protocol Process)

The first day of the event is primarily devoted to administrative preparations, technical briefings and the official opening ceremony.

- **10:00-20:00 | Kit distribution:** Official registration and pickup of materials for participants.
- **10:00-20:00 | Kaçkar Village - EXPO:** Opening of the trade show and exhibition hall to visitors.
- **15:00-16:00 | Race information (main stage):** Technical briefing on the course details, safety rules and regulations.
- **16:00-17:00 | Opening ceremony & elite athlete introduction:** The official opening of the event and the ceremonial introduction of elite athletes at the international and national levels.

Day 2: Saturday, 12 September 2026 (Competition Day)

All three main races are held on the second day. The starts are staggered by category so as to distribute the load on the single start corridor at Ayder and on the shared sections of the courses.

- **04:00 | Kaçkar 100KM start (Ayder):** Maximum allowed race time 24 hours; the cut-off therefore falls at 04:00 on Sunday.
- **06:00-07:00 | Kit distribution (Kaçkar 50KM):** Distribution of documents and materials to athletes in the 50KM category.
- **06:00-19:00 | Kaçkar Village - EXPO:** The active operation of the exhibition centre.
- **07:30-09:00 | Kit distribution (Kaçkar 20KM):** Distribution of documents and materials to athletes in the 20KM category.
- **08:00 | Kaçkar 50KM start (Ayder):** Maximum allowed race time 12 hours and 30 minutes.
- **10:00 | Kaçkar 20KM start (Ayder):** Maximum allowed race time 6 hours.

Day 3: Sunday, 13 September 2026 (Closing and Evaluation Process)

The final day of the event includes the recognition of achievements, an awards ceremony and official closing activities.

- **09:00-13:00 | Kaçkar Village - EXPO:** Closing session at the expo grounds.
- **10:00-12:00 | Awards ceremony:** Presentation and recognition of the top-ranked athletes on the podium.
- **12:00-13:00 | Closing ceremony:** The official conclusion of the event.

Source: Compiled by the authors from the official race and schedule pages of Kaçkar by UTMB (UTMB World Series, 2026c).

FINDINGS AND RACE RESULTS

A qualification of central importance must be made regarding the inaugural edition. Owing to heavy snowfall at high altitude and the resulting avalanche risk, the organizing committee cancelled the Kaçkar 100KM two days before the start; the 20KM and 50KM races were held as planned, with an updated GPX track published for the 50KM course (Haberler, 2025). The results reported below therefore cover only the 20KM and 50KM categories. This decision constitutes an empirical confirmation of the climatic risk analysis presented in the field analysis above: the September transition period in the Kaçkar Mountains can produce conditions that make competition above 3,000 m unsafe. Consequently, climate risk management should be treated not as a contingency measure but as a structural component of event design, and the possibility of course cancellation should be incorporated into destination branding communication from the outset.

The results achieved in the races held on 26-28 September 2025 nevertheless clearly demonstrate the high level of difficulty of the courses and the intensity of international competition. In particular, the first-place finishes by elite athletes from countries that are global leaders in mountain sports - such as Switzerland and the United States - have confirmed the sporting excellence of the event at an international level (Table 2, Figure 26).

Table 2. Kaçkar by UTMB 50KM and 20KM overall results (2025 edition)

Category	Rank	Women	Men
50KM	1	Jasmin Nunige (SUI)	Cole Campbell (USA)
50KM	2	Tuğçe Karakaya (TUR)	Sven Koch (GER)
50KM	3	Greta Garcia Moran (ESP)	Iurii Shtankov (RUS)
20KM	1	Beyza Güzel (TUR)	Mestan Turhan (TUR)
20KM	2	Tanya Vasilevskaya (RUS)	Andrey Menyakin (RUS)
20KM	3	J. Laricheliere-Banken (CAN)	İrem Can Ayaz (TUR)

Source: Compiled and prepared by the authors from the official results database of Kaçkar by UTMB (UTMB World Series, 2026c).



Figure 26. The Altıparmak Mountains along the 100 km run route (Source: Authors)

DISCUSSION: REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

Assessment of Economic and Social Impacts

During the event, occupancy rates at tourist accommodations in the Ayder Basin and throughout Rize - with Çamlıhemşin as the central hub - were reported to have reached their maximum levels (Tourism Vision, 2025); the regional sports tourism potential underlying this capacity had already been set out in the workshop declaration of the provincial administration (Rize Governor’s Office, 2023). The influx of approximately 5,000 people (athletes, technical staff, families and spectators) into the region simultaneously generated significant economic revenue and provided a much-needed boost during the autumn season - referred to as the “off-season” - for local businesses, the logistics sector and lodging establishments (Tourism Vision, 2025).

From a social perspective, the integration of the local community into an international-scale sports event has significantly increased the interest of younger generations in outdoor sports in multiple ways and has made a strategic contribution to the institutionalization of “sports tourism” awareness at the local level.

International Promotion and Digital Destination Marketing

“Kaçkar by UTMB” reached millions of viewers through Eurosport and global outdoor broadcasting networks. The global promotional campaign, which began with the standalone “Discover Kaçkar” booth at the ITB International Tourism Fair in Berlin, evolved into a macro-level digital destination marketing effort through the production of real-time digital content and live broadcasts during the race (EBSDA, 2025, 2026). This strategy has spurred the branding of the Kaçkar Mountains not merely as a static nature tourism destination, but as a dynamic and professional international sports venue.

Ensuring Sustainability and Nature Conservation Principles

Since a very large portion of the race courses passes through the boundaries of Kaçkar Mountains National Park, environmental awareness and ecological sensitivity have been prioritized to the highest degree. Guided by the globally recognized “Leave No Trace” principles, the organization has meticulously monitored solid waste management at water stations, minimized plastic use and ensured that directional signs are made entirely from temporary or biodegradable materials. This proactive approach provides the literature with an academic and practical sustainability model demonstrating how large-scale sports events can be successfully integrated with environmental conservation awareness and biodiversity sensitivity (Figures 27, 28 and 29).



Figure 27. The Kavrun Plateau - Derebaşı route on the 100 km course (Source: Authors)



Figure 28. The Great Kaçkar Mezovit campsite, located within the 100-km running area (Source: Authors)



Figure 29. Views of the Mezovit campsite, Öküzyatağı Lake, Derebaşı Lake and the Upper Kavrun Valley, taken from the 3,937-metre-high Great Kaçkar Peak (Source: Authors)

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

“Kaçkar by UTMB” is the most visionary initiative implemented as part of the macro sports tourism and destination branding strategies of Türkiye. This event has demonstrated that the unique natural and cultural assets of the Kaçkar Mountains can be presented to the global market with high added value through a professional management framework and international partnerships. At the same time, the cancellation of the flagship 100KM course in the inaugural edition shows that the sustainability of this brand value depends directly on the management of climatic and topographic risk.

The following strategic recommendations can be developed for the future:

Ensuring continuity and building trust. The five-year strategic agreement signed within the framework of the organization represents a significant opportunity for institutionalization. Dynamic improvements should be made each year on the basis of qualitative and quantitative feedback regarding trail safety, climate risk management and the athlete experience.

Digital transformation and GIS integration. The entire inventory of outdoor sports resources in the Kaçkar Mountains (trails, water sources, emergency assistance and first aid stations) should be converted into Geographic Information System (GIS)-based mobile applications. This infrastructure will not be limited to the race season but will provide a guarantee of “safe and sustainable routes” for individual outdoor sports enthusiasts throughout the entire year.

Deepening local participation. Residents of Çamlıhemşin and the surrounding highlands should be actively involved in the organization - not merely as passive spectators - but as local guides (mountain guides), suppliers of locally sourced, geographically certified food and logistical support units. In line with the “Shepherd of the Kaçkar Mountains” philosophy, ancient local knowledge and modern academic reasoning must be fused together.

Academic monitoring and carrying capacity. The ecological, sociocultural and socio-economic impacts created by the organization must be monitored through regular annual academic monitoring reports; analyses of the ecological carrying capacity of the region must be periodically updated to ensure that the balance between conservation and use is strictly maintained.

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