



CURRENT STATUS AND EXPECTATIONS OF TOURISM IN KYRGYZSTAN

Kyrgyzstan has the potential to be one of the important tourism centers among Central Asian countries with its natural beauties, historical and cultural richness. One of these opportunities is nature tourism. Due to its mountainous terrain where the Tian Shan Mountains cover 65% of Kyrgyzstan's land it is often referred as the "Switzerland of Central Asia". The Central Asian region is among the tourism routes that have not yet been explored enough with its many natural wonders and historical richness. In this regard, the fact that the United Nations (UN) World Tourism Organization included Kyrgyzstan in the list of countries with the highest probability of increasing the number of tourists in the next 10 years is a sign that the country's tourism potential is just being discovered. In this direction, the Kyrgyz government has included the tourism sector in various national development strategies in order to fully utilize the potential of the tourism sector. Among these, the Sustainable Development Strategic Plan of the Kyrgyz Republic 2013-2017 and National Development Strategy 2018-2040 can be shown.

According to the Kyrgyzstan National Statistics Committee, as of 2014, there are 88.6 thousand (private and legal persons) businesses operating in the tourism sector of Kyrgyzstan. Issyk Kul is one of the most popular and main tourism routes of the country. The Issyk Kul Region is defined as the "Pearl of Kyrgyzstan" and takes its name from Issyk Kul, the world's second largest crater lake in the region. Issyk Kul is the most famous and most visited touristic region of the country, offering opportunities for local and foreign tourists to relax and have a good time during the summer season. The Tourism Department of the Minister of Culture, Information, Sports and Youth Policy of the Kyrgyz Republic announced that the number of tourists visiting Kyrgyzstan in 2018 was 1.4 million, among which more than 900 thousand tourists vacationed in Issyk Kul. In the same year, tourism revenues amounted to 27 billion som (\$319.3 million) and constituted 5% of the Gross Domestic Product.

According to the World Tourism Organization, the number of tourists worldwide was 1.23 billion in 2016 and the income obtained from this reached 1.5 trillion dollars. In addition, 270 million people work in the tourism sector worldwide. According to the same report, between 1990 and 2017, the number of tourists worldwide increased by 576% in the Asia and Pacific Ocean region. All the information given within this general framework shows us that there is a global expansion in the tourism sector and Asian countries are also benefiting from this growth potential to a great extent. Hosting many international events in this regard in recent years also helps Kyrgyzstan to increase its recognition in tourism at the international level. As one of them, it can be stated that the contribution of the World Nomad Games is very important. At this point, world-renowned media organizations such as Forbes, Global Spots 2013, World Travel and Tourism Council, Geographical Travel Awards, National Geographic Traveler, National Geographic, Financial Times, The Guardian paid special attention to the World Nomad Games. Moreover, Kyrgyzstan is among the top 10 countries in the world recommended for visiting in 2019 by The Guardian and Lonely Planet.

When we examine the structure of the tourism sector in Kyrgyzstan, we can see that there are businesses that serve in many different capacities. At this point, the different price practices of the enterprises show us that there is no general price policy in the sector. In this regard, dealing with the issue with a more institutional understanding of the relevant institutions will contribute to both the development of competition conditions and the improvement of the services offered to tourists. This will have positive effects on the increase in the number of tourists coming to the country.

All these developments have contributed to the positive image of Kyrgyzstan, which defines itself as a touristic country in Central Asia. This promising potential in the Central Asian states, especially in

terms of nature and cultural tourism, cannot be utilized at the desired level. In this regard, the inclusion of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in the Silk Visa (akin to Schengen visa model), which is planned to be implemented throughout the region is expected to positively affect the tourism sector of Kyrgyzstan. With its current capacity, Kyrgyzstan has the opportunity to increase the tourist flow by 10%, thereby generating income of more than 400 million dollars. It is estimated that the income from tourism can reach up to 1 billion dollars thanks to the development of information technology and infrastructure.

The number of tourists visiting Kyrgyzstan in 2010 was around 855 thousand. In 2016, this number reached 2 million 930 thousand. The data show that the number of tourists visiting the country has increased by more than 3.5 times. According to the 2017 report of the National Statistics Committee of the Republic of Kyrgyzstan, the citizens of Kazakhstan (55.4%) visited the country the most. Kazakhstan is followed by tourists from Uzbekistan (14.5%), Russia (14.2%), Tajikistan (7.5%), Turkey (1.6%), People's Republic of China (1.2%) and India (0.6%). In this context, it can be stated that the policies to be carried out both for the neighboring countries where the most visitors come and for the citizens of foreign countries with which the country has good relations will contribute to the development of the tourism potential of the country in a short time.

As a result, Kyrgyzstan is a country with a high potential to be one of the frequent destinations of foreign tourists with its rich cultural assets and yet undiscovered natural beauties. However, in addition to the infrastructure problems, the lack of qualified workforce, inadequacies in the fields of promotion, advertising and marketing do not yet allow to achieve the expected results from the tourism sector. Considering the problems faced by the tourism sector in Kyrgyzstan, determining it as one of the priority sectors among the investment and development plans in the country is among the promising developments for the future of the sector.

Politics, Foreign Affairs, and Security

- The Chairperson of the Kazakh Senate Maulen Ashimbayev recently visited Uzbekistan, where he had a meeting with Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev. The parties discussed the development and deepening of multifaceted cooperation between the two countries. They mentioned the importance of cooperation in mechanical engineering, textile industry, transport and tourism. It was noted that in 2021 the trade turnover between the two countries increased by 40% (UzReport, 05.06.2021).
- The President of Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon visited Pakistan, where he had a meeting with Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan. The parties discussed issues of comprehensive cooperation, including political, economic, trade, investment, energy and security ties. During the visit, parties sign a number of agreements and memoranda of understanding. Emomali Rahmon also had a meeting with his Pakistani counterpart Arif Alvi. Rahmon's current visit aims to reinforce the efforts of both sides to forge a multi-dimensional relationship (Asia-Plus, 02.06.2021).
- The State Commission of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan on the delimitation and demarcation of the state border conducted a working meeting. The Commission declared that the difficult border situation had been resolved peacefully. The parties signed a protocol to continue efforts for peaceful resolution of the border conflict, which included measures to withdraw border posts 3 km inland on each side and withdraw military equipment to their permanent deployment sites, leaving only regular border guards (Kabar, 05.06.2021).
- The Prime Minister of Georgia Irakli Gariashvili visited Ankara, where he met with the President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The sides discussed a range of issues of mutual interest and regional cooperation. While making a press statement, the Prime Minister of Georgia announced that destiny had decided that the three states, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey, are interdependent, have very close cooperation, partnership and most importantly friendship. The Turkish President noted that Ankara viewed Tbilisi as the "key to regional cooperation," and stressed in this regard the importance of trilateral cooperation with Azerbaijan (Civil.ge, 02.06.2021).
- The President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev held a telephone conversation with his Uzbek counterpart Shavkat Mirziyoyev. Reviewing the course of development of bilateral cooperation and the current agenda of regional relations, the Presidents noted the similarity of the aspirations of the two countries for further systematic deepening of strategic cooperation. The sides also emphasized the importance of the full implementation of the agreements in various fields reached at the top-level meetings (Centralasia.news, 04.06.2021).
- While visiting Pakistan, the Speaker of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey Mustafa Sentop was received by the President of Pakistan Arif Alvi. The sides discussed various aspects of the bilateral relations noting that they were based on religious and cultural linkages, besides unanimity of views on regional and international issues. It was emphasized that Turkey and Pakistan needed for further enhanced political and economic cooperation for the mutual benefits of the two sides. Referring to Pakistan's disputes with India, Mustafa Sentop said that Turkey would continue to support Pakistan's stance on Kashmir (Anadolu Agency, 02.06.2021).

Economy, Finance, and Energy

- The Kazakh Minister of Energy Nurlan Nogayev attended a meeting of the country's Parliament, where he announced that Kazakhstan planned to increase the volume of petrochemical production up to two million tons by 2025. During the reported period, the exports of the sector will increase eight times. It is expected that Kazakhstan will launch five plants worth \$4.7 billion and begin the construction of seven plants worth \$12.7 billion. The Ministry plans to attract \$9.1 billion of investments during 2021-2025 (Qazaq TV, 03.06.2021).
- Within the framework of the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum, full-fledged free trade agreements of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) with Iran and India were negotiated. In 2020, bilateral trade between the EAEU members and Iran increased by 18.5% and reached \$3 billion. In the first quarter of 2021, the EAEU's exports to Iran surged by 43.5%. Experts also paid special attention to the development of the International North-South Transport Corridor (Qazaq TV, 04.06.2021).
- Energy cooperation between Uzbekistan and Russia is deepening. Recently, one of the largest oil and gas companies of Uzbekistan Jizzakh Petroleum signed a four-sided Memorandum of Understanding with Russia's Gazprombank, VEB.RF investment firm and the Russian Agency for Export Credit and Investment Insurance for the financing of the new greenfield gas chemical complex worth \$2.8 billion. The parties will cooperate with respect to the financing of the project and the insurance of the risk in the amount of \$800 million preliminarily (UzReport, 04.06.2021).
- According to the National Bank of Kyrgyzstan, in the first quarter of 2021, the country experienced positive dynamics in the volume of remittance inflows. In particular, during the reported period the amount of remittances increased by 22.4% year-on-year amounting to \$420 million. The inflow of remittances is critical for the household incomes of migrants' families. In January-April of 2021, the growth of real GDP excluding the Kumtor minefields amounted to 1.1% (Kabar, 01.06.2021).
- According to the representative of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) in Turkmenistan Anton Usov, the Bank's cumulative investments in the country amounted to \$350 million. Usov mentioned that the EBRD's current portfolio was \$85 million. The Bank is exploring project opportunities in the banking and municipal sectors. Its key strategic priority is to support Turkmenistan's private sector development. The Bank provides long-term finance directly to local private sector firms and supports them through the Trade Facilitation Program (Trend, 06.06.2021).
- A delegation from Turkey's Nuclear Regulatory Authority visited the Belarusian nuclear power plant. The visit was organized in cooperation with the Nuclear and Radiation Safety Department of the Belarusian Emergencies Ministry to implement the memorandum of understanding between the parties. The delegation was acquainted with the current state of the first and the second units of the nuclear power plant, the work of the control room personnel and the equipment used in the local training facility (BelTA, 03.06.2021).

Society and Culture

- The Jochi Khan historical and cultural center will open under the Ministry of Education and Science of Kazakhstan. The center is meant to become a scientific center for studying the era of the Golden Horde serves as a tourist destination. The center has an area of 2,500 square meters and will include an exhibition hall, hotel, tents for exhibitions and shops carrying national products and jewelry. The opening of the center was first announced at the "Ulug Ulus of the Golden Horde: Origins, History and Heritage" International Practical Conference held in Nur-Sultan on May 31, 2021 (Astanatimes, 02.06.2021).
- The capital of Tatarstan Kazan is hosting the XV International Theater Festival of Turkic Peoples "Nauruz". Over the course of the festival, 28 theaters from Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and the national republics of Russia will present their works at six theater venues in Kazan. The event is organized by the Ministry of Culture of the Republic and will take place until the 11 of June 2021. The festival will be broadcast online on the theater's website kamalteatr.ru (Centralasia.media, 04.06.2021).
- The Senate of Kazakhstan has ratified the Agreement between Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan on cooperation in the field of migration. The document will allow the parties to exchange information about legal entities and individuals operating in the territories of the two countries. The agreement is aimed at creating a legal basis for cooperation between the two countries in the field of migration and the implementation of joint measures to counter illegal migration (Avesta-news.kz, 04.06.2021).
- The number of foreign citizens living in Russia continues to decline due to the coronavirus pandemic. As of May 1, 2021, the number of foreign citizens in the country amounted to 5.66 million, compared to 7.1 million at the end of 2020 and 9.6 - 11.2 million in 2019. The vast majority (86%) of those who come to Russia are citizens of countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States. Most of all, the number of citizens of Ukraine and Moldova decreased - by 53% and 51%, respectively. There is also a significant decline of citizens of Kyrgyzstan (by 18%), Armenia (by 22%) and Tajikistan (by 35%) (Avesta.tj, 03.06.2021).
- Kyrgyzstan launched a climate knowledge and information platform with the support of the UN Climate Change Learning Partnership (UNCC): Learn Project on Climate Change Education in the Kyrgyz Republic, financial support from the Swiss government and methodological support from The United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The initiative is aimed at strengthening institutional capacity, providing information and create a dialogue platform on climate change and climate finance for all stakeholders. (Kabar, 04.06.2021).
- The government of Uzbekistan organized a research expedition in Karakalpakstan to study the potential and value of the region's cultural heritage sites. The expedition took place under the auspices of the International Institute for Central Asian Studies (IICAS) and with the support of University College London within the framework of the Central Asian Archaeological Landscapes project. The researchers explored an area of over 5,000 hectares and obtained information on 53 monuments of the region. The recommendations developed by experts will help to form a strategy for the inclusion of objects in the prestigious international UNESCO list (Uzdaily, 02.06.2021).