

AFTER BLOCKING FACEBOOK TAJIKISTAN VANISHED FROM THE TOURISM MAP



Tajikistan blocked Facebook in the spring of 2012 before blocking a number of Russian and English language news sites. Tajikistan has found that its tourism industry has dried up in response.

Tajikistan's economy is reliant on aluminum and cotton exports. It receives remittances from about a million men working in Russia and more prosperous former Soviet republics. Tajikistan blocked Facebook and other social networks in the hope of preventing a revolution like the ones that have swept through Egypt, Tunisia and other Middle Eastern countries.

Tajikistan has never had a large tourism industry. As a mountainous and landlocked country, it had few natural wonders. **It has the beautiful Pamir Mountains, eco-tourist opportunities, adventure tourism and an off-the-beaten path allure for those who have already seen India and China.** Tourism has been hampered by a lousy visa and entry permit system that does not yet handle foreign visitors who would want to visit the Pamir Mountains or Gorno-Badakhshan.

Small businesses in the fledgling tourism industry were relying upon Facebook to get the word out. Facebook is free to the 26,000 users, many of them small businesses that could not afford to set up websites. The decision to block many major websites also hampered communication methods like Yahoo email and Google's Gmail.

Since few small businesses in Tajikistan have any other way of communicating with potential tourists outside of the country, they have lost their only way of promoting tourism internationally and of communicating with potential tourists. **Blocking Facebook may also have made it harder for the million or so migrant workers to communicate cheaply and reliably with others back home and arrange visits back to Tajikistan.** Twitter was unaffected by these cuts, but few potential tourists or travelers use Twitter to make travel plans.

The act of blocking major social networking sites also chilled the plans of many possible travelers. Tajikistan has elections planned for early next year, and there are rumors of a brewing revolution. The fact that the government took such a drastic step as blocking social media sites gives credence to these rumors.

This dissuades adventure tourists and business people from travelling to Tajikistan, since it proves that the government fears a major revolution despite the failed one in May, 2012. The restrictions on internet communication and cell phone service shut-downs in some regions also give many potential visitors pause, since they could not communicate with employers or family while in the country.

Given the turmoil near the Afghan border, the inability to call for help makes even the most adventurous tourists choose to stay home. The Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Province reported that the combination of local unrest and communication shut downs caused 99% of all bookings to get cancelled.

Travel from surrounding countries is also limited due to political wrangling. The border crossings

into other former Soviet countries like Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are shut down without warning. This prevents even local and international tourists in the area from visiting Tajikistan though they are literally next door.

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