

Tourism in Kazakhstan - New Branding Strategy Needed

Kazakhstan, the 9th largest country in the world, having a rich history of nomadic civilizations, a large natural diversity and being a part of the famous Silk Road, still attracts few tourists from around the world. How come?



Challenges

The low number of visitors has clear reasons. First of all, Kazakhstan has two neighbors that are promoting their tourism offer quite effectively and have a very distinct brand: Uzbekistan, taking advantage of its rich past with historical and recently renovated Silk Road cities; and the smaller brother Kyrgyzstan, with the same nomadic past as Kazakhstan, and with an abundance of high mountains, lakes and preserved nomadic lifestyle. Both countries have managed to create a clear touristic brand and attract many foreign visitors. Kazakhstan lacks this distinct brand, has on offer 'something of everything', which should be translated into a new brand and a new branding strategy.

Trends and Successes

The inbound tourism in Kazakhstan is on the rise, though slowly. To some extent this must be related to the growing publicity that the country is receiving due to its geopolitical position, with an abundance of oil and other natural resources.

During the last five years a program to establish homestay opportunities across several parts of the country and in the vicinity of (potential) tourist destinations has been successful, giving tourists the

opportunity to observe and take part in local Kazakh village life. In such a vast and empty land one cannot expect hotels everywhere, so this initiative is very welcome, in addition giving local communities a livelihood out of tourism. Therefore, programs that include these destinations are now on offer and welcome a growing number of visitors.



Finally, it is important to observe that Almaty has the region's most important international airport, with more and more international air companies offering flights for lower prices.

Destinations

What exactly can a visitor expect to find in Kazakhstan? In general, something of everything; steppe almost everywhere, and high mountains up to 7,000 meters in border areas with Kyrgyzstan, China and Russia; unusual rock formations in several parts of the country, including the very remote western peninsula of Mangyshlak; nomadic traditions in the villages and nomadic life in summer in the mountains; traces of the Silk Road and the Turkestan Mausoleum of Ahmed Khoja Yasawi in the south; rocky oasis and Soviet heritage in the center, including remnants of prisoner camps and nuclear test sites; the shrinking Aral Sea with its notorious ship graveyards and the Baikanur Cosmodrome in the center-west; the new capital Astana with its modern and outstanding architecture; the cultural centre Almaty with a skiing resort and surrounding varied landscapes... Wherever one travels in Kazakhstan, due to the small number of tourists and the vastness of the country, one cannot but feel like a pioneer - and a very welcomed pioneer.

Future

What is needed to increase the volume of tourists to Kazakhstan? While we have focused on how to bring foreign visitors to Kazakhstan, the most important task for the Tourism Authorities would be to

make the local population more interested in its lands and its past. More domestic visitors would greatly improve the facilities, helping to attract foreigners in the process.

The Tourist Authorities should establish a new brand for Kazakhstan as a tourist destination; create a number of tours that relate to this, and promote them heavily, with the aid of Kazakhstani and foreign tour operators and travel agencies.



One would think that the diversity of Kazakhstan should be the essence of this new brand, incorporating in the (new) programs attractions like Astana with its architectural gems, Almaty and its cultural life, remnants of the Silk Road in the south, and of course the natural diversity of the country, including steppe, high mountains and mountain lakes, all of which can be found in both the Almaty and Altai region in relatively compact areas.

But, we cannot omit mentioning the famous hospitality of the Kazakhs, preserved from times when denying a stranger a place to stay in ones yurt meant his or her death, and which can still be felt everywhere.

These days Kazakhstan is a liberal country with a peaceful, harmonious blend of people and religions, both Asians and Europeans, Muslims and Christians. If nothing else, this should be the reason to make a visit.

Ranking of the Tourism Potential in Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan rated 93rd among 139 countries in the World Economic Forum's 'Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Report 2011'. Russia was a leader among the CIS countries ranking 59 in the rating. It was followed by Georgia (73), Azerbaijan (83), Ukraine (85), Armenia (90), Kazakhstan (93), Moldova (99), Kyrgyzstan (107), and Tajikistan (118).

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