

Tourism Hopes Pinned on Alpine Lake Region

High in the mountains of Kyrgyzstan, near China's western border, there lies the country's jewel: **Lake Issyk-Kul**. Kyrgyz officials and local entrepreneurs have long hoped that international tourism to the lake - which is ringed by eternally snowcapped mountains - might provide a lucrative boon for their cash-strapped economy. But the slow pace of Kyrgyz investment suggests it is up to others to make Issyk-Kul a hotspot for international tourism.



Lake Issyk-Kul, tucked away in Kyrgyzstan's northeast corner and measuring 160 kilometers east-to-west and 60 kilometers north-to-south, is the **second-largest alpine lake** in the world.

But although nature has bestowed remarkable beauty on this area, it has also presented formidable obstacles. The region lies deep in the heart of the Asian continent - far from the affluent capitals of Europe, East Asia, and even Russia. Access can be difficult, with poorly maintained roads snaking up toward the 7,000-meter mountain peaks.

But local official Nurlan Nasirdinov and other development-minded Kyrgyz want to see Issyk-Kul become the centerpiece of the country's tourism industry.

"Lake Issyk-Kul is a unique place," Nasirdinov says. "It has curative properties. A person can relax here, rest, and recover their health. Aside from that, we have mountain tourism and extreme-sport tourism. I think the future of Issyk-Kul is bright."



Only a few towns along the northern shore host resorts. The biggest is **Cholpon-Ata**, where Kyrgyz officials have sought to attract international conferences and investment. Four out of five tourists are from nearby Kazakhstan - most of the rest are Russians.

Former Kyrgyz President Askar Akaev had pinned high hopes on Issyk-Kul, hosting annual international investment summits here each year until he was ousted by a popular revolt in 2005.

It is not surprising that locals are looking across the border to Kazakhstan, where vast oil resources are driving an economy that is growing by 8-9 percent per year. Its increasingly wealthy business leaders are looking for places to invest - and relax. Kazakhs own a huge cement plant outside the Kyrgyz capital, and hold controlling or other major stakes in four Kyrgyz banks.

Laws barring foreign ownership prevent the ownership of land, but local official Nasirdinov says eager investors - with the right connections - can skirt such legislation.

"If a person is from some government - say Kazakhstan - and if he really wants to invest, then that is possible; it works," Nasirdinov says. "But we insist that the jobs there go to residents of Kyrgyzstan. And, of course, that helps Issyk-Kul's infrastructure."



The effects of small-scale Kazakh investment in Issyk-Kul are already evident. Once-modest cabins - with no running water and communal bathrooms - have been joined by hotels named after Kazakhstan's former capital. A huge billboard advertises a health spa that claims ties to Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbaev. Nazarbaev has a vacation home nearby, purportedly a gift from former President Akaev.

(text shortened)

Second Largest, Second Highest

Enclosed on all sides by the snowy peaks of the Tien Shan Mountains, lake Issyk-Kul literally meaning "hot lake" is said to be the world's second-largest alpine lake or second-highest navigable lake in the world after lake Titicaca in South America, the lake never freezes even in the depths of winter due to some thermal activity, strong winds, physics of deep water and unique microclimate over the lake. In lake flows 118 large and small rivers, but there is no streams flowing out of the lake. That is why the water is slightly salty. The lake's water consist of 10 billion tones of different salts, but there is 5 times less salt then in Oceanic water what is right enough for keeping the lake clean and very comfortable for swimming.

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