

TOURISM IN UZBEKISTAN OPENING TO THE WORLD



Uzbekistan is going through a transitional period after the death of its first and only president Islam Karimov. He ruled the for 25 years and died in September this year. He was known for strict dictator-like, isolating policies. Now it seems that tourism in Uzbekistan is one of the sectors heading towards a more open approach.

Uzbekistan's president-elect Shavkat Mirziyayev, elected on December 4, is already adopting measures to promote tourism in Uzbekistan. **On December 6, he signed a decree to introduce a simplified visa regime for foreign visitors from 27 countries.**

According to the decree, tourists from these 27 countries will be able to enter Uzbekistan without a visa for tourism purposes for up to 30 days. Tourists from these countries will have to pay \$50 as an entrance fee.

Some countries from the list will have limitations based on age. Citizens of Belgium, Indonesia, China, Malaysia, the USA, France, Vietnam, Israel, Poland, Hungary, Portugal and the Czech Republic need to be aged 55 or over to enter Uzbekistan without visa.

On the other hand, citizens of Australia, Austria, Britain, Germany, Spain, Italy, Canada, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, South Korea, Singapore, Finland, Switzerland, and Japan will have unlimited access starting on April 1, 2017 when the decree comes into force.

Simultaneously, the so called "green corridors" will be introduced at international airports in Uzbekistan. Here a system of simplified customs control will be launched for foreign visitors. To date there was nothing of this kind in the Central Asian state.

The presidential decree also abolished the national company Uzbektourism. The company was in charge of the coordination of tourism in Uzbekistan. As a replacement, Mirziyayev wants to form a State Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan for the development of the industry.

The document also says that from January 1, 2017 payment services for hotel accommodation for foreigners will be carried out only in a freely convertible currency. Another important feature of the document is the measures to further stimulate entrepreneurial activity in the sphere of tourism, development of tourism infrastructure, provision of tourist organizations of additional privileges and preferences.

The government has been tasked with developing a concept for the development of tourism in Uzbekistan. A program of specific measures for the development of the concept from 2017 to 2021 is also to be discussed.

Nikolai Serbin, executive director of the company Central Asia Travel, praised the Uzbek government. "After Kyrgyzstan simplified their visa regime for citizens of 44 countries, tourism inflow increased significantly. I think that things will go similarly in Uzbekistan," the expert noted.

"The country has everything necessary to attract more tourists. **The government is actively involved in the development of tourism in Uzbekistan.** It invests in transport infrastructure,

builds hotels, security is at a high level. And of course, Uzbekistan is a fantastic country. There are medieval mosques, ancient forts, minarets but even modern metropolitan centers or the delicious Uzbek cuisine,” Serbin added.

Tashkent is well known for its museums. The most widely visited one is the State Fine Arts Museum, though the Nukus Museum in Nukus is regarded as one of the top museums in the region. Other than that the city of Samarkand with the Registan and Shah-i-Zinda is a massively popular destination. It is ranked #1 among Uzbek destinations on TripAdvisor.

The effects of the presidential decrees remain to be seen. However, Uzbekistan indeed does have the potential to become a top tourism destination. But it will still take some time to stabilize and redirect the country into the right path.

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