

One of the most closed countries of former USSR opens doors to the rest of the world, but mass tourists don't visit the region.

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According to the State Committee for Tourism of Uzbekistan, 5.3 million tourists arrive at the country every year. In the last couple of years, the authorities have created conditions for safe independent and group tourism: online registration, car rent, tourist police, electronic visas, etc. Uzbekistan regularly ranks high among countries safest for individual travel.

Moreover, the State Committee for Tourism has rebranded Uzbekistan on the global travel market: the country is advertised during the English Premier League football matches free of charge, travel experts from National Geographic, The Guardian and The Telegraph are being invited to Samarkand and Bukhara.

The agency said the driver behind the growing popularity of this travel destination was the waiver of visas for the nationals of 55 states in 2018. Also, the procedure of obtaining an electronic visa has been simplified. Now it can be obtained within two business days instead of a few months, which used to be years before.

Benefits have been offered to investors creating the tourism infrastructure, including WCs and hotels. Public spaces with free Wi-Fi hotspots are emerging in cities. Finally, long-standing bans of photo and video recording have been cancelled in public spaces, excluding sensitive sites.

However, there inflow of tourists is low.

“Poorly manufactured deception”

A Kyrgyzstani, **Tomiris Orozoeva**, who visited Uzbekistan in spring 2019, complained she had to deal with registration issues instead of enjoying her trip. According to her, on the one hand, online registration makes life easier for a tourist, but on the other hand, it creates a range of problems:



Nurzhan Bekboeva (to the left) and Tomiris Orozoeva (to the right). Photo courtesy of T.Orozoeva

- The page with instructions on how to fill in an arrival card on the website of the tourism committee displays an error message. No other examples of filling in the card are available.

Second, you cannot pay a five-dollar fee with your Visa or Master Card, only an Uzbek Uzcard, which tourists do not have.

At the passport control, when you cross the border, some officers say there is no online registration and only after demands to check information in the electronic system they let you go.

Dozens of tourists have encountered the same problems.

Her friend **Nurzhan Bekboeva** said many foreigners “get entrapped” in a situation when they cannot exchange Uzbek sums back into their own currency.

Free exchange market has been opened since 2017 in Uzbekistan; however, you can get bank notes in an exchange for dollars and euro. You can buy foreign currency only with your Visa card, whereas you can cash your Master Card only in two-three spots in Tashkent. Moreover, you can hardly pay with international payment cards.

“It’s impossible to exchange the remaining Uzbekistani sums back into dollars. It looks like a poorly manufactured deception of tourists, which leaves you with a bad taste in your

mouth,” Nurzhan complained.

Overall, the girls feel happy about the historical image of ancient towns of Uzbekistan, cheap and delicious national cuisine, feeling of safety. But they have bad memories of the lack of public toilets, slow and expensive mobile internet, price discrimination against tourists and the lack of online railway ticket booking service.

At numerous travel forums travellers by car share their sad experience of crossing the border within Central Asia. For example, tourists from Moscow Denis and Tatiana Aleshins in April 2019 travelled to Uzbekistan via Kazakhstan. They spent over 12 hours at the customs station in Karakalpakstan. The driver was staying in the car and the passenger was staying outside as she had to cross the border as a pedestrian.

Statistics lies

[According](#) to the State Statistical Committee, 6.4 million foreign citizens visited Uzbekistan in 2018. This is a formidable amount, but the agency emphasises that one person can be counted many times and can be seen as an isolated example.

According to the expert in tourism, **Murat Sarsenov**, the State Committee for Tourism mistakes the wish for the reality. The agency defines all foreign citizens entering Uzbekistan as tourists. And the huge inflow can be explained by a waiver of visas with Tajikistan and opened land border with Kyrgyzstan. Shuttle traders and ordinary citizens rushed into Uzbekistan from border areas.

In 2018, 1.7 million citizens of Tajikistan, 1.1 million citizens of Kyrgyzstan and 2.4 million Kazakhstanis visited Uzbekistan.

Last year, ex-head of the State Committee for Tourism Aziz Abdukhakimov admitted that real tourists were less than 10 per cent of the total number of foreign visitors. According to the experts interviewed by us, the real number varies within 0.5-1 million tourists per year. “The data of the State Statistical Committee and the State Committee for Tourism have nothing to do with the reality. The World Tourism Organisation provides statistical data received from Uzbekistan’s State Committee for Tourism... Of course, it is a lie,” Sarsenov said.



Bukhara. Photo: uzbekistan.travel

Between tour operators and interior ministry

Last November, experts called for the development of event-based, nostalgic, environmental, medical (dental tours), cultural and educational, sports tourism at the public discussion of the decree of the head of state on development of tourism until 2025. The point was, for example, to preserve the monuments of Soviet architecture, to hold musical festivals, to develop mountain tourism, to remove a ban on the use of drones. The State Committee for Tourism promised to consider all suggestions; however, six months later no result followed.



Farkhod Mirzabaev. Photo: CABAR.asia

According to independent political analyst **Farkhod Mirzabaev**, the State Committee for Tourism is now between the hammer and the anvil. On the one hand, it is being criticised by tour operators and the expert community. On the other hand, security agencies have bound the committee hand and foot.

They, for example, advocate against the use of drones, for the registration of tourists and organised travel groups. Despite the fact that the security agencies, which have got used to have total control of everything, have made some concessions, like the waiver of visas, they keep on lobbying their interest successfully.

One can be imprisoned for ten years for an illegal use of drones in Uzbekistan. Transit tourists, who actually don't need a visa, have to provide personal data to national security agencies.

"The State Committee for Tourism is not the only organisation that determines the national policy in this regard. The registration upon arrival issue will be solved in future, just not all at the same time. The national security agencies are probably against its cancellation," Mirzabaev said.

A portrait of a tourist

An expert in tourism, Murat Sarsenov, said it's not bureaucratic barriers like visa that hinder the tourism boom, but conditions for tourists.

"There are dinosaurs in the State Committee for Tourism, who rely upon the 19th century travel market, that is they count on rich tourists," he said.

In fact, a tourist in Central Asia and particularly Uzbekistan is seen as a money-bag. Operators and tourists posting reports in social media admit this fact.

The assumption is that mainly senior and wealthy Europeans and Asians visit Uzbekistan and they need expensive hotels and organised recreation.

However, the flow of young tourists learning about Uzbekistan from "the most underrated travel destinations" and travel bloggers is growing. They become an insight for the travel service providers in the country.

Backpackers prefer staying in cheap hostels, saving on trips and breaking stereotypes of "rich European tourist."



Tourists in Uzbekistan. Photo: gazeta.uz

The country, upon the recommendation of experts, has simplified the procedure of starting a mini hostel. This trend is developing, yet weak competitiveness cannot affect the reduction of accommodation prices. The market decides everything: once we have mass tourists, hotels will be in high demand. Consequently, hundreds of small hostels and guest houses will emerge and prices will drop. We don't have it so far, which means there's no tourism boom either, unlike the statement made by the State Committee for Tourism.

Moreover, transportation is a heavy expenditure item for a tourist. The aviation market of Central Asia needs low-cost airlines to develop tourism: both domestic, as Fly Arystan in Kazakhstan, and foreign ones.

One and a half years ago, Uzbekistan announced the establishment of a national low-cost airline, which ended in talk. A dozen of international low-cost carriers are ready to enter a multimillion national market. However, it's all talk.

For comparison, it costs 772 dollars and more (return ticket) to fly from Frankfurt to Tashkent by Uzbekistan Airways.

Wizz Air low-cost airline offers a return flight from Budapest to Nur-Sultan, the capital of Kazakhstan, for 100 dollars and more.

“Expensive air tickets are the problem of our airline. Uzbekistan Airways works for the sake of the image not profit. Market mechanisms may remain unchanged, they are perfect in terms of the image, but for this purpose we miss the opportunities of the open market. They say we are going to lose our airline once we let low-cost airlines in. But this is not a problem. We need to create conditions. Suppose our airline goes bankrupt. It will be replaced by other airlines immediately, while prices will drop and tourists will come,” Sarsenov said.

He noted that Uzbekistan and European countries have neither motor roads, nor railroads connecting them except the air travel.

Moreover, experts said the country has a huge tourism potential, which, in the opinion of officials, is limited to ancient towns and national cuisine. Mountain clusters are almost undeveloped in Surkhandarya and Kashadarya regions, the only entertainment in the Kyzylkum Desert is camel riding and night stays in yurts.

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