

The countries of Central Asia and South Caucasus don't count on each other in terms of tourism and are pursuing a more aggressive campaign promoting their countries in non-CIS countries.

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Tourism is one of the most prospective areas of economy for the republics of Central Asia and South Caucasus. The countries in the region have something to offer to foreign tourists – diverse and intact nature, historical and archaeological monuments, rich and delicious cuisine, authentic culture combining the legacy of various empires and nations. All these together with traditional Caucasian and Asian hospitality and cheap prices compared to traditional travel destinations offer good prospects for the development of tourism.

The regional countries understand it well and take measures to promote the growth in this area of economy by easing visa regime, building the up-to-date tourism infrastructure, carrying out aggressive advertising and PR campaign abroad.

## Successes and failures

Certain results have been achieved – the number of foreign tourists in the region is steadily growing. Georgia and Uzbekistan have the most visible successes in this sphere because tourism has traditionally been one of the important sectors of economy.

According to the official statistics of Uzbekistan, in 2018 the number of foreign tourists in the country was twice as much as in 2017.

In Georgia, the number of foreign visitors in 2018 hit another record high and was 8.6 million compared to the 3.7 million population.

Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan see tourism as an escape from oil dependency and measures to develop the sphere are included into national programmes for economy diversification. Last year, the number of tourists in these countries has increased by 7 and 10 per cent, respectively.

For weak and poor in mineral resources economies of Armenia, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, tourism is one of the few developing sectors that yield real income. In Armenia, the number of tourists increased by 10 per cent in 2018. In Tajikistan, where the years of 2018-2021 were declared the years of tourism and folk crafts development, the flow of tourists increased 2.5 times last year. And in Kyrgyzstan the number of foreign visitors last year was 1.5 times more than in 2017.

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The countries in the region often apply different approaches to count the number of tourists and this number often involves foreigners, whose purpose of visit is job or visiting relatives. Nevertheless, the number of arriving foreign travellers tends to increase everywhere. Turkmenistan stands apart from the rest. On paper, the country is interested in foreign tourists and has even built a special resort zone Avaza, positioned by the authorities as a magnificent seaside resort comparable to Dubai and Antalya. In fact, the visa regime that is virtually applicable to all world countries and a devastatingly complex process of travel visa receiving make travels to Turkmenistan almost impossible.

## **We're not going to Central Asia**

A visa-waiver regime between the countries of Central Asia and South Caucasus (excluding Turkmenistan), a lack of language barrier, and territorial and cultural proximity may become a good ground for the exchange of tourists between these regions. However, despite the growing popularity of Central Asia and South Caucasus as a global travel destination, the residents of these regions are not eager to visit each other's countries. According to official data, no Central Asian state can be found among the top 15 most travelled destinations in Azerbaijan. Kazakhstan is among the top 20 destinations in Azerbaijan - it falls behind the United States, China and some European countries in terms of travel packages sold. The countries on the other side of the Caspian Sea are the least popular.

There are a few reasons. First, local travel agents know little about tourist attractions in Central Asia in general.

Azerbaijan does not offer ready group tours to Central Asia, and the majority of Azerbaijan tour operators do not have ready travel packages to Central Asian states. Only specific agencies are ready to offer individual tours to the pearls of Uzbekistan - Samarkand and Bukhara.

At best, tours to the capitals of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan can be offered. In case of Kazakhstan, such tours can be appealing to prospective tourists, while there are virtually no people wishing to see the sights of Bishkek and Dushanbe. The majority of Azerbaijan tour operators have no idea of the natural wonders of these countries.

Azerbaijan tour operators don't offer tours to Turkmenistan as it's almost impossible to get a visa there. Another factor hindering the development of the exchange of tourists between Azerbaijan and Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan is bad transport connection. There are no direct

flights between these countries despite the fact that this issue has been discussed for many years. Connecting flights in other countries turn out to be time-consuming, inconvenient and unfavourable.

The situation with flights between Georgia, Armenia, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan is the same. The cost of tour packages from the Caucasian states to Central Asia doesn't contribute to tourism development either. According to travel agencies, the cheapest tour from Baku to Kazakhstan or Uzbekistan for a week will cost about 1,200-1,400 euro for two persons in a three-star hotel with breakfast. The price doesn't include transportation, city tour and entertainment costs within the country, costs of museum tickets, lunches and dinners. Agencies offer all-inclusive group tours to Turkey or Egypt at five-star hotels at the same price.

The majority of costs account for air tickets. The Baku-Tashkent-Baku flight costs 350-400 euro per person.

The embassy of Uzbekistan in Baku organises events to share travel opportunities with Azerbaijan tour operators and journalists from time to time. At one of them, a head of a local travel agency fairly admitted that such ticket prices make packages to Uzbekistan meaningless - tours to Europe look more attractive because one can use a low-cost airline to get there for 50 euro.

The employees of the embassy have promised to discuss the problem with airlines and to try to solve it. Two years have passed since then, yet the air ticket prices have not changed.



*Photo: ca-news.org*

However, after Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have waived visas for the citizens of the majority of Western countries in the last three years and simplified the visa regime for a range of other countries, these destinations have become rather popular as a destination for long weekend trips among foreigners residing in Baku.

“I have liked it very much. We’ve had a great time there and I’d like to visit them once again. Interesting architecture, friendly people, delicious food, beautiful stoneware that can be bought as a souvenir. And everything is rather cheap,” Ann, an American working in Baku for three years, told about her trip to Samarkand and Bukhara.

### **Take another look!**

The situation with travels from Central Asia to South Caucasus is slightly better. Kazakhstan is among the top ten of countries by the number of foreigners visiting Azerbaijan and Georgia. Although this number includes not only the tourists, but also business travellers and representatives of the numerous Azerbaijan and Georgian diasporas that arrive at South Caucasus to visit relatives.

Kazakhstanis can be often seen at the hotels of the Azerbaijan resort Naftalan known for its medicinal oil baths, on the streets of old Baku and Tbilisi, at sports events in the capital of Azerbaijan, which grow in number – Formula 1 races, European games, a recent UEFA Europa League final.

Tours to South Caucasus, at least to Baku and Tbilisi, are available at many operators of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. The websites of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan travel agencies provide more information about these travel destinations. The feedback of Central Asian tourists about the Caucasus countries is usually very positive.

A trip to South Caucasus is often a chance to break down stereotypes of the sameness of post-Soviet cities and to take another look at the region according to the tourist brand of Azerbaijan (“Take another look”).

However, this destination has a problem of rather high cost of packages – tours to the other side of the Caspian Sea are more expensive than tours to Turkey, Egypt, Dubai or China.

### **Pay more, get less**

Another reason why tourists from Central Asia and South Caucasus prefer Turkey or Egypt is the level of service, which is much better in popular travel destinations than in post-Soviet countries.

A specialist in hotel industry, Adrian Ellis, who was general manager of Fairmont Baku Hotel (one of the new landmarks of the city) in 2011-2014, in one of his interviews to The Caterer admitted that work in Baku was one of the hardest in his career:

“I was responsible for the opening of the hotel with 340 suites and seven restaurants, and none of the non-managerial staff had had experience in the hotel business. We were supposed to teach them everything - from making beds to laying tables.”

Today the countries of Central Asia and South Caucasus don't count on each other in terms of tourism and are pursuing a more aggressive campaign promoting their countries in non-CIS countries. They are visited more by experienced travellers who wish to open new travel destinations, rather than by those who prefer all-inclusive recreation.

“I am not sure if Azerbaijan will ever become a spot of world tourism, and I don't think it's needed. This is a small country with neither “world's tallest -tower”, nor largest beach hotels. Azerbaijan means mountain villages located 2,500 m high, amazing views to Caucasian mountains, small resorts, mud wells. It's a unique experience, rather than mass tourism,” Florian Zengstchmid.

According to experts, the service quality standards in the country do not meet the world standards. The same can be said about other countries in the region located at both sides of the Caspian Sea. Therefore, the country is visited more by experienced travellers who wish to open new travel destinations, rather than by those who prefer all-inclusive recreation.

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