

The tour operators in Tajikistan assess the summer season's results as disastrous and predict the situation's aggravation.

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Dushanbe resident Odina Makhmadov planned to spend a vacation with his 60-year-old mother in a health resort in Tajikistan this year, but due to the coronavirus, he decided to go to the village to visit relatives.

He is concerned that the risks of getting infected with COVID-19 are still high.



Odina Makhmadov. Photo from personal Facebook page.

“I was planning to go to Bahoriston resort with my mother, but the circumstances changed. I think we will not be able to go to the holiday resort this year. My mother is at coronavirus risk group by age, it is better to save money for a rainy day,” Makhmadov added.

Before the coronavirus outbreak, Tajik travel companies sent Tajik travelers to Dubai and Turkey and invited foreigners to visit Tajikistan.

However, the Committee on the Tourism Development under the Government of the Republic of Tajikistan temporarily banned the entry and exit for tourists starting from March 17. In late March, Tajik authorities closed borders to foreigners to prevent the spread of the virus.

After this, Tajik travel companies intensified their work to attract local citizens to internal tourism.

The head of the Bunyod-Tour travel agency Suhrob Kurbonov told CABAR.asia that the company had to stop the implementation of a number of projects and agreements due to the coronavirus.

According to Kurbonov, they currently provide about 40 tours to tourist sites in Tajikistan, including Haft Kul, Iskanderkul, Chiluchorchashma, Romit, Norak and others.

“Before the coronavirus pandemic, we received online requests from foreign tourists, but the spread of the virus disrupted their travel plans. We also send tourists abroad, but no one applied this season,” he said.

Since the beginning of the year, Bunyod-Tour lost over 300 thousand somoni (about \$30 thousand) due to the coronavirus.

“In 2019, our company had over a million somoni (about \$100 thousand) on our account. However, in 2000, we have only 200 thousand somoni (about \$20 thousand) left,” says Kurbonov.

Kurbonov blames the pandemic for this.

“For our travel companies, including Bunyod-Tour, 2020 was a total failure. During the season, there was quarantine everywhere, everything was closed, the summer already ended like that,” Kurbonov said.

He predicts the aggravation of the situation, since very few people are interested in autumn tours.

“People also talk about the second wave of coronavirus. Therefore, I think that things will not go well in the autumn. All planned contracts were canceled,” notes the head of the travel company.

Murod Nazarov, deputy head of the Sky Tour travel agency, said the coronavirus outbreak and border closures negatively affected their activities. Since the beginning of March, when the flights were completely canceled, they had to send all their employees on unpaid leave due to the lack of clients, he said.

According to Nazarov, recently, Sky Tour together with the Rakhsh Taxi company organized the Camping Village project aimed at attracting citizens to domestic tourism. The “All Inclusive” package cost in the Camping Village is 350 somoni (about \$35).

On the first trip, they brought tourists to the Saratog River in the Fan Mountains and to Iskanderkul lake. However, there were not many clients for this trip.



Suhrob Kurbonov. Photo: CABAR.asia

Murod Nazarov agrees with the opinion that this summer season was disastrous for travel companies.



Murod Nazarov. Photo from personal Facebook page

“Sky Tour Company suffered financial damage of 80-90% in 2020 comparing with previous years. It will be difficult to compensate for the losses. In March, we sent employees on unpaid leave and did not accept any requests since that time. We froze all previous requests,” Nazarov said.

At a press conference in August, Deputy Chairman of the Committee on the Tourism Development under the Government of the Republic of Tajikistan Khabibullo Amirbekzoda said that over the six months of this year, over 341 thousand foreign citizens visited Tajikistan, of which over 306 thousand arrived in the country as tourists. Last year, over 550 thousand people visited Tajikistan, and thus, the 2020 indicators are lower than last year’s by 243.4 thousand, or 44.2%.

Foreign tourists were mainly citizens of Russia, the USA, China, Turkey, Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan. According to Amirbekzoda, over 200 travel companies operate in Tajikistan.

Tajikistan’s Health Resorts Also Claim the Reduction of the Client Pool

On June 15, with the authorities’ permission, the health resorts of Tajikistan resumed work after an almost two-month break. Since the end of April, some of them were closed, while others worked as quarantine and treatment centers for dozens of people.

Zukhurrullo Zoidboev, the chief physician of Zumrad health resort, told CABAR.asia that the number of people wishing to rest there decreased almost four times.

“Our sanatorium has 350-400 beds. In previous years, they were all full, but this year we had not even 100 clients since the opening,” Zoidboev said.

According to his opinion, this is due to the coronavirus’ impact on the country’s economy, including the reduction in the volume of migrant remittances. The incomes decreased and people can no longer afford the expenses for summer vacations.



Zukhurrullo Zoidboev. Photo from personal Facebook page

Isfandiyor Saidov, deputy director of the Khoja Obi Garm health resort, also said the number of vacationers decreased by 4-5 times.

According to him, last year at the same time, they had 400 clients a day, but now, there are only 100-120. He connects the decline in the number of vacationers with the coronavirus’ impact, welfare worsening and public concerns.

“The coronavirus affected not only Tajikistan, but the whole world. There were economic, psychological and moral consequences,” Isfandiyor Saidov added.

According to him, taking this into account, the management reduced the prices in the health resort by 10%. A year ago, clients paid 180 somoni (about \$18) per day for a regular room. This year, they can rest there for 165 somoni (about \$16). For the lux rooms, the price was reduced from 260 somoni (about \$26) to 235 somoni (about \$23).

Gulnora Kholmatova, the chief physician of the Bahoriston health resort, also confirmed that the population’s demand for recreation has significantly dropped. In previous years, up to a thousand clients stayed in the resort in the summer, but this year, only 250-300 places were occupied.

For the demand drop, Kholmatova also blames the coronavirus, which led to the panic among the people.



According to official data, the number of foreign tourists decreased by almost half. Photo: Committee on the Tourism Development under the Government of the Republic of Tajikistan

“There are many conflicting reports about the virus; people do not know how to protect themselves from infection. Therefore, they prefer staying at home and not going anywhere,” says Kholmatova.

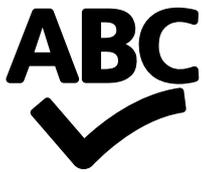
MP: “The Tourism Sector Turned Out to Be the Most Vulnerable One”

Gulbahor Naziri, Member of the Parliament of Tajikistan, Doctor of Economics, believes that the tourism sector turned out to be the most vulnerable sector of the economy during the pandemic.

“...In this context, it is necessary to coordinate efforts to save the country’s tourism companies, hotels, technology companies, travel agencies, restaurants, independent tourism workers and to use all resources to save hundreds of jobs provided as a source of income for the tourism sector,” Naziri stated in the report published on the Parliament’s website.

In early summer, the Tajik government announced some measures to support tourism and business. By the Presidential Decree from June 5, tax holidays were announced from April 1 to September 1, 2020 for tourist facilities, hotels, catering establishments, health and sports centers, health resorts, international passenger transport and air navigation organizations. The tax authorities were prohibited from charging interest and penalties for the late payment of taxes for this period.

This article was prepared as part of the Giving Voice, Driving Change - from the Borderland to the Steppes Project



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