
TOURISM OF CENTRAL ASIA

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ABSTRACT

Tourism, the act and process of spending time away from home in pursuit of recreation, relaxation, and pleasure, while making use of the commercial provision of services. As such, tourism is a product of modern social arrangements, beginning in western Europe in the 17th century, although it has antecedents in Classical antiquity.

Keywords: Tourism, History, Heritage, Culture, Tourists

Introduction

Central Asia is an area that was, until recently, inaccessible for independent travelers. That has all changed, although the traveler will still often come up against a wall of Soviet-style bureaucracy. Despite this, Central Asia is increasing in popularity amongst travelers who want to experience one of the world's last great frontier lands.

Historically and geographically diverse, Central Asia is a very interesting region. As a bridge between Europe and Asia, the region was the home of the Silk Road, the ancient trading route between the two continents in the first centuries of the common era. The following millennia saw much upheaval and conflict, from the expansion of Islam, the period of Mongol domination and the 'Great Game' between imperial Britain and imperial Russia in the 19th century.

After a traumatic break-up from the USSR, Some Central Asian countries are beginning to find their feet and offer good travelling options. There are parts of Central Asia that will have hardly seen a traveler before, and there are many wild and beautiful landscapes to be explored. That is not to say the region is bereft of problems, chiefly a lack of infrastructure and stifling bureaucracy.

Understand that self-identification is an especially touchy issue in Central Asia, more so than most of Europe. Parts of China (Notably Inner Mongolia, Tibet and Xinjiang) have a native population that has in many instances advocated for secession from China. Often they emphasise their Central Asian identity, something not well-understood by outsiders. For example, Mongolians and Buryats tend to emphasise their historical ties with the Turkic Muslims to the west (despite being Mongolic Buddhists of the Tibetan Rite) and are offended by being compared to the Chinese, and some even call themselves Europeans (by virtue of Russian influence).

This situation is not unique to Mongolic peoples; Tibetans are well known in the West for their disdain for China and any ties they may have to it. Many people in Tatarstan and Xinjiang, among other places, would emphasise their Turkicness over any connection to China or Russia.

The problem goes the other way as well. Many ethnic Chinese are quick to point out that the Manchu Empire included parts of Central Asia, including land no longer controlled by the Chinese.

All in all, Central Asian identity is greatly shaped by their nomadic nature. From Kyrgyz to Tibetans, a history of tribal politics has left Central Asia at once totally isolated from the outside world, and intimately connected to whoever conquered them.

Tourism is distinguished from exploration in that tourists follow a “beaten path,” benefit from established systems of provision, and, as befits pleasure-seekers, are generally insulated from difficulty, danger, and embarrassment. Tourism, however, overlaps with other activities, interests, and processes, including, for example, pilgrimage. This gives rise to shared categories, such as “business tourism,” “sports tourism,” and “medical tourism” (international travel undertaken for the purpose of receiving medical care).

By the early 21st century, international tourism had become one of the world’s most important economic activities, and its impact was becoming increasingly apparent from the Arctic to Antarctica. The history of tourism is therefore of great interest and importance. That history begins long before the coinage of the word tourist at the end of the 18th century. In the Western tradition, organized travel with supporting infrastructure, sightseeing, and an emphasis on essential destinations and experiences can be found in ancient Greece and Rome, which can lay claim to the origins of both “heritage tourism” (aimed at the celebration and appreciation of historic sites of recognized cultural importance) and beach resorts. The Seven Wonders of the World became tourist sites for Greeks and Romans.

Pilgrimage offers similar antecedents, bringing Eastern civilizations into play. Its religious goals coexist with defined routes, commercial hospitality, and an admixture of curiosity, adventure, and enjoyment among the motives of the participants. Pilgrimage to the earliest Buddhist sites began more than 2,000 years ago, although it is hard to define a transition from the makeshift privations of small groups of monks to recognizably tourist practices. Pilgrimage to Mecca is of similar antiquity. The tourist status of the hajj is problematic given the number of casualties that—even in the 21st century—continued to be suffered on the journey through the desert. The thermal spa as a tourist destination—regardless of the pilgrimage associations with the site as a holy well or sacred spring—is not necessarily a European invention, despite deriving its English-language label from Spa, an early resort in what is now Belgium. The oldest Japanese ones (hot springs) were catering to bathers from at least the 6th century. Tourism has been a global phenomenon from its origins.

Modern tourism is an increasingly intensive, commercially organized, business-oriented set of activities whose roots can be found in the industrial and postindustrial West. The aristocratic grand tour of cultural sites in France, Germany, and especially Italy—including those associated with Classical Roman tourism—had its roots in the 16th century. It grew rapidly, however, expanding its geographical range to embrace Alpine scenery during the second half of the 18th century, in the intervals between European wars. (If truth is historically the first casualty of war, tourism is the second, although it may subsequently incorporate pilgrimages to graves and battlefield sites and even, by the late 20th century, to concentration camps.) As part of the grand tour’s expansion, its exclusivity was undermined as the expanding commercial, professional, and industrial middle ranks joined the landowning and political classes in aspiring to gain access to this rite of passage for their sons. By the early 19th century, European journeys for health, leisure, and culture became common practice among the middle classes, and paths to the acquisition of cultural capital (that array of knowledge, experience, and polish that was necessary to mix in polite society) were smoothed by guidebooks, primers, the development of art and souvenir markets, and carefully calibrated transport and accommodation systems.

Tourism became even bigger business internationally in the latter half of the 20th century as air travel was progressively deregulated and decoupled from “flag carriers” (national airlines). The airborne package tour to sunny coastal destinations became the basis of an enormous annual migration from northern Europe to the Mediterranean before extending to a growing variety of long-haul destinations, including Asian markets in the Pacific, and eventually bringing post communist Russians and eastern Europeans to the Mediterranean. Similar traffic flows expanded from the United States to Mexico and the Caribbean. In each case these developments built on older rail-, road-, and sea-travel patterns. The earliest package tours to the Mediterranean were by motor coach (bus) during the 1930s and postwar years. It was not until the late 1970s that Mediterranean sun and sea vacations became popular among working-class families in northern Europe; the label “mass tourism,” which is often applied to this phenomenon, is misleading. Such holidays were experienced in a variety of ways because tourists had choices, and the destination resorts varied widely in history, culture, architecture, and visitor mix. From the 1990s the growth of flexible international travel through the rise of budget airlines, notably easyJet and Ryanair in Europe, opened a new mix of destinations. Some of these were former Soviet-bloc locales such as Prague and Riga, which appealed to weekend and short-break European tourists who constructed their own itineraries in negotiation with local service providers, mediated through the airlines’ special deals. In international tourism, globalization has not been a one-way process; it has entailed negotiation between hosts and guests.

TOURISTICAL CITIES OF CENTRAL ASIA:

Almaty is the former capital of Kazakhstan, and is still its largest city. Being a financial and cultural center of Central Asia, Almaty boasts moderately-sized tourist and expatriate communities.

On a clear day you can see the beautifully rugged, snow capped mountains, right at the city's doorstep to the south. The city, in general, slopes from south to north which makes navigating the streets easy. If you are traveling uphill, you're going south. There is also a small mountain range bordering the city to the east.

Almaty is in the top 50 most expensive cities worldwide for expats to live in according to Mercer Human Research. Although Almaty dropped from 30th place in 2007 to 44th in 2008, it's still more expensive than Toronto, Los Angeles or Hamburg. Still, if done carefully - Almaty can be as cheap as many South American and Eastern European cities. It is a wonderful gateway to this undiscovered and distinctive country. Kazakh people are very kind and welcoming, and you will be pleasantly surprised by the hospitality.

Ashgabat is a showpiece capital. It has been designed, at the cost of billions of dollars, to show the world about the glories and accomplishments of the Turkmen. The city looks like none other on Earth – a thoroughly artificial collection of white marble buildings across a long, dry valley. At sunrise or sunset, there's a beauty to this uniform, outsized ambition, as if the set of a science-fiction film suddenly became an actual human settlement. During the scorching days, when walking from monument to monument across the shadeless streets, or trying to locate anything resembling normal human life in the center, Terry Gilliam's Brazil seems like the most accurate comparison.

Image control is taken very seriously. You will encounter many, many security guards and policemen with a strong opinion about how to behave and not behave in the capital. Don't take pictures of the presidential compound or military complexes (a large barracks is right next to the palace). Avoid areas with roadblocks or where it seems like senior officials may be present. Most other buildings are

generally OK – although this could change at any time. Outside of the monuments, best to snap a quick picture and move on.

While large chunks of land in the city are taken up by the dreams of independent Turkmenistan's two presidents, pockets of an older, simpler life survive. Areas of the city with small apartment buildings and quiet neighborhood restaurants can be found, sometimes just off to the side of these large buildings. Head to the outskirts and country Turkmen life appears with surprising rapidity.

Samarkand was sporadically occupied in the Bronze and Early Iron Ages. A city was founded in pre-Achaemenid times, between 650 and 550BC. A wall followed the whole circuit of the plateau (5.5km), complemented by another one which separates the town from the acropolis, situated in the northern part and itself including a citadel raised on an artificial platform. The massive wall, 7m thick, was made of coarse mud bricks, all of which bear a mark, an indication that labour was strictly organized in groups of workers. Similar building techniques have been noticed at other Sogdian and pre-Sogdian sites during that pre-Achaemenid period.

The city was conquered by Alexander the Great in 329BC. It was named Maracanda by the Greeks. Two phases of Greek occupation can be distinguished, the first lasting from Alexander to the second half of the 3rd century BC and a second period of reconquest under the Greco-Bactrian king Eucratides (171-145BC). The pottery differs markedly between these two phases.

Today, the tourism sector has become one of the great economic engines in many countries, forming part of the international political agenda. In recent years, with low-cost flights and the existence of alternative accommodations, managed by online companies, it is much easier for tourists to afford to travel and they can design their itinerary and experiences to their liking.

Tourism not only impacts the local economy, but it is also starting to affect the social structures, culture and lifestyle of the destinations visited. Therefore, the challenge now is to provide solutions by developing a tourism awareness that is respectful with the environment and the local way of living of its inhabitants.

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