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## REVIEW

# Work & Play

**Kazakhstan presents strong MICE opportunities, with plenty of room for weekend relaxation outside the cities in its stunning nature reserves.**

Kazakhstan is a vast and varied land with tremendous potential for a vibrant and unique tourism industry. The ninth largest nation in the world by area, it is the world's biggest landlocked country and the most dominant economic player in Central Asia. Bordering Russia, China, and fellow CIS states Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan is quintessentially at a crossroads. An extremely narrow strip of land separates the country from Mongolia, and its Caspian coastline puts it in direct contact with Azerbaijan and Iran. For millennia, travelers, pilgrims, and merchants have traversed Kazakhstan's massive steppes, forests, and deserts. To the uninitiated, however, Kazakhstan is more commonly associated with its Soviet history. Sputnik, Yuri Gagarin, and the Mir Space Station were all launched into space from the Baikonur Cosmodrome, which is located in Kazakhstan and leased by Russia. Furthermore, its economic dominance of the CIS region makes it a prime location for MICE tourism.

The country's tourist industry is in its infancy, but growing steadily. The number of inbound tourists in 2010 was 4.7 million, an 8.8% increase from the previous year. Additionally, investment in the sector grew by 58% to \$1.33 billion in the same year. In March 2010, President Nazarbayev's Decree 958 introduced a tourism industry section to the state program for industrial development. Ultimately, the program aims to create a number of tourist sites along the East-West axis between Europe and China and build more tourist facilities including information centers, accommodation, and ski resorts. The emphasis for domestic tourism companies, however, lies with helping people travel outside of Kazakhstan. As the Director of Kazakhstan Tourist Association, Rashida Shaikenova, told TBY, "Approximately 90% of the Kazakhstani tourism market consists of small businesses. Unfortunately, 84% of companies specialize in sending people abroad. Only 16%-18% of companies focus on internal tourism." Domestic tourism is, as yet, an untapped resource, with thousands of years of history on its doorstep. Investment in the tourism industry in 2010 grew by 58.3% compared with 2009 (KZT122.9 billion) and amounted to KZT194.6 billion. Whereas the total volume of services increased by 11.2% and amounted to KZT73.1 billion, while the 2009 figure stood at KZT65.7 billion.

Kazakhstan has much to offer as a tourist destination. Kazakhstan's legacy as a land of cultural interaction is embodied in towns and ruins along the Silk Road. The Central Asian country is also a land of significance to Islam and to the various Turkic peoples. Those interested in eco-tourism will be attracted to the country's varied climatic zones and topography.

### THE SILK ROAD

For 3,000 years a series of land and water routes carried travelers and goods between Europe, Asia, and Africa. Known to the modern world as the Silk Road, these routes connected the economies of antiquity: China, India, Persia, Arabia, and the Roman Empire. Silk from China was not the only commodity bought and sold; merchants also traded cloth, ivory, wine, spices, and precious metals. Islam spread through Central Asia, and Buddhism made its way from India to China along the Silk Road. The dispersal of religions, technologies, genes, and diseases along the trade route was a significant force in the development of modern civilization.

Today the Silk Road is the greatest tourist draw in Central Asia. In October 2010 the head of the UN's World Tourism Organization, praised the ancient route as a potential hot spot for



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international travelers. Taleb Rifai, the secretary-general of UN's World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) said, "Already, Silk Road countries account for 30% of international tourism arrivals and 20% of international tourism receipts." Ancient cities along the route boast a unique art and architecture produced by the fusion of the many people and cultures that used the road. Monuments like the mausoleum of Hodja Ahmed Yassavi, erected by Tamerlane during the 14th century, are significant not only to cultural tourists but also Muslim pilgrims. Museums house many of the handicrafts such as ceramics, tapestries, and metalwork that were made locally or traded in Kazakhstani towns. The government plans to capitalize on this cultural heritage by constructing tourist centers along the old trade route and focusing on Silk Road tourism in its promotional efforts.

#### MICE & MORE

As the preeminent economic power in Central Asia and a beneficiary of considerable foreign investment, Kazakhstan is a logical hub for business, conference, and event tourism. Almaty, the largest city and cultural capital, and Astana, the de jure capital of Kazakhstan, are both fast growing cities that are served by a number of international air carriers. Several major conferences have been held in Kazakhstan in recent years, including the 2010 OSCE Summit, which was held in Astana, the annual Astana Economic Forum, and in 2011 the World Islamic Economic Forum. It is this lucrative business market that Kazakhstan is poised to make inroads. In addition to offering world-class facilities, tourism companies are looking to add something extra to the quick business stop. "For business travelers we offer weekend tours near Almaty and Astana with attractions such as golf courses and spas... we try to introduce the Kazakh lifestyle," Rashida Shaikenova of the Kazakhstan Tourist Association told TBV.

In recent years, as Kazakhstan's economy has grown at a brisk pace, the capacity of hotels and conference halls in the major cities has expanded. In December 2008, Astana opened the Palace of Independence—a mammoth convention center, ceremonial hall, and museum. The first floor of the conference hall has a 3,082-person capacity, while there is also a 268-person ceremonial hall and 220-person press center. The ground floor also houses a restaurant with a 678-person capacity. The Palace of Independence features décor that celebrates the Kazakh people's nomadic lifestyle. Art galleries, a hall of archaeology, and ethnographic exhibits illustrate all aspects of steppe life.

In 2011 the Asian Winter Games showed Kazakhstan in a new light—as a potential hot spot for outdoor sports. The games were the largest event hosted by Kazakhstan since it gained independence from the Soviet Union and were divided between the cities of Almaty and Astana. A total of 26 nations and 843 athletes participated, while the government spent \$1.4 billion between 2006 and 2011 to develop facilities for the games. In addition, transportation facilities, including Almaty Airport, were upgraded to handle the increased volume of visitors. In the end, Kazakhstan ended up taking home the most medals during the competition, but the success of the games themselves were equally significant as a source of national pride.

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