

INFLUENCE OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF TOURISM AND MEASURES OF CREATING SUSTAINABLE TOURISM IN UZBEKISTAN

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic plunged the whole world into a protracted economic crisis, dealing a significant blow to all branches of human activity. Some areas have suffered serious losses, in particular, the tourism industry. This article discusses measures to restore and strengthen the tourism and hospitality sector after the pandemic in the Republic of Uzbekistan. A Safe Tourism program has been developed in the Republic of Uzbekistan; tourists will use tourist services, follow the sanitary and hygienic rules during trips. This project will provide travelling individually, choosing a destination and booking what they need during travelling online.

The purpose of the article is to analyse the situation in the world and Uzbekistan as well, during the pandemic, as well as to develop practical measures to rehabilitate the tourism sector from the consequences of the economic crisis associated with the pandemic. New offers are being considered in the tourism market to attract tourists to our country. The primary attention in the paper is focused on the development of electronic platforms for the formation of "online tourism", architectural sights and monuments combining the history of different peoples and religious denominations. The article also provides information about alternative medicine, and lists of several of treatment

methods used by our ancestors and actual nowadays. The report summarizes some of the study results, concluding that the tourism business of Uzbekistan needs to radically rethink existing business models through innovation and digitalization of tourism. Examples of the development of such market segments as agro and eco-tourism are given. This segments are currently beginning to develop and are of interest to tourists. It is mentioned that Uzbekistan is among the top 10 countries in terms of security.

Keywords: pandemic, crisis, online tourism, UNWTO, safe tourism

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Introduction

In the current conditions of the global coronavirus pandemic, economic sectors are experiencing not the best of times. The Covid-19 pandemic has affected all sectors of the economy; the tourism industry has proved to be the most vulnerable to the threat of the coronavirus. Coronavirus has not bypassed the Republic of Uzbekistan, the tourism industry has significant potential for development and is a strategic sector of the economy, whose share in the country's GDP is more than 6% (The Law of the Republic..., 2019).

The Covid-19 pandemic plunged the whole world into a protracted economic crisis, dealing a crushing blow to all sectors of the economy. Some areas have suffered particularly serious losses. Among them is tourism, according to the estimates of the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO). In 2020, the number of international tour trips decreased by 60–80% (Decree of the President..., 2020). The data shows that it is several times higher than the impact on the industry of the economic crisis of 2008, when the decline was only 4% (Zohrabyan, 2020). The contribution of tourism to the economy is significant; the inflow of foreign currency, promoting regional development, employment and entrepreneurship. The restoration of the tourism industry is a priority task of international importance. About 330 million people worldwide are employed in the sphere of culture and tourism. As a result of the pandemic, 10% of them lost the opportunity to work. A significant part of such people are women and young people. When the industry is trying to recover in new conditions, constantly changing rules and regulations make this task far from easy. UNWTO called for a “sustainable recovery of the tourism sector” to “create a balance between the needs of people and the planet for the well-being of all” (Loguntsova,

2020). In Uzbekistan, the shock caused by this pandemic has also contributed to increased responsibility. New regulations and laws for creating of sustainable tourism are being developed, and special attention is being paid to the development of rules to ensure safe tourism.

1. Materials & methods

The crisis is an opportunity to rethink the development of tourism. The restoration should include the change of the sector, tourist destinations and enterprises, the restructuring of the tourist ecosystem, the improvement of services and measures for safe tourism, the implementation of innovation and investment in sustainable tourism.

At its core, tourism is an experience that includes; acquaintance with local landscapes, sights of historical significance, tasting the taste of local food. The primary function is assigned to people engaged in the field – whether they are guides, hotel operators or persons providing other services that make travel unique or help in conducting business and enter international markets. Our response measures should be focused, first of all, on the human factor and fulfill the promise not to leave anyone without attention. The crisis should become an opportunity to ensure the correct distribution of profits from tourism, to change the industry forward on the path to a safe and sustainable sector of the economy.

According to data from UNWTO, the negative impact of the coronavirus was reflected in a reduction in international tourist arrivals in the first quarter of 2020 by 67 million US dollars and export losses worth 80 billion US dollars (Loguntsova, 2020). At the same time, the crisis led to the loss of a vast number of jobs in the tourism industry in the world, the social sphere of life also suffered, by more than 30 per cent. Employees, entrepreneurs engaged in the tourism business need to develop a fixed plan and improve the quality of tourist reception. Taking into account the rather impressive losses, the tourism industry needs to be restored, and follow the requirements that have arisen in the fight against the pandemic. Many countries have already started developing and implementing a certification system of tourist facilities for safety from the epidemic. For example, Spain was one of the first to create and approve new sanitary protocols for tourism at the state level. Thus, tourism begins to function in a new reality, which involves strengthening control over the strictest possible compliance

with sanitary standards to exclude the possibility of a repeat of pandemic outbreaks. Almost 1.4 million foreign tourists visited Spain in May 2021. Last year, the figure for this month was 0, according to data from the National Institute of Statistics (INE) (The tourist flow..., 2019). A highly likely consequence of the crisis will be: much more attention of tourists to their safety, sanitary and epidemiological situation in the country. Where people gather: at airports, at train stations; people will undoubtedly wear masks, and personal hygiene will become fundamental, and tourists will observe all this – to protect their health and the health of their loved ones.

Based on history, epidemiological diseases that shook the world have occurred before, for example, during the First World War. Despite the current situation, tourism could get back on its feet and survive these difficult periods. Thus, the history of global economic crises proves that after a short period, tourism will receive a new surge for development. Experts note that such a severe crisis in the tourism business has not been observed since the Second World War. As practice shows, each subsequent situation creates opportunities for developing new types of services in the tourism industry, giving options for the development of new directions. We can forecast that soon in the future, the demand for online tourism, digital technologies and mobile applications regarding the tourism industry will grow (Providing support and..., 2020).

Currently, the development of “online tourism” is underway in Uzbekistan. The Ministry of Tourism and Cultural Heritage and its national PR centre is launching a new website that will allow people to organize virtual tours of Uzbekistan. That will be the first platform which will offer virtual tours throughout Uzbekistan. The site covers three primary routes, which allows people to make virtual trips around Uzbekistan. It will be possible to organize online business for representatives of the tourism industry, cooperate with owners and managers of hotels, tour operators, guest houses and guides.

Security on the territory of the Republic of Uzbekistan, for both citizens and tourists, is at a high level. Thus, the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Sh. M. Mirziyoyev issued a decree, which emphasizes the importance of providing sanitary and epidemiological safety for tourists (Decree of the President..., 2020). For the functioning of both internal and external tourism: expanding transport routes, improving the quality of transport services, widely promoting tourist products, as well as strengthening the image of our country as a safe place for travel and recreation. For this purpose, Uzbekistan has developed the project “Uzbekistan. Safe travel guaranteed” (Decree of the President..., 2020). The project is a new system of

sanitary and epidemiological safety for tourists based on world standards. At the same time, the Ministry for the Development of Tourism and Cultural Heritage of the Republic of Uzbekistan, together with the Ministry of Health, have developed and are supplementing the “register of safe objects”, on the basis of which tour operators will form tourist routes. Certification of business entities (catering services, accommodation facilities, transport services, etc.) is voluntary. An essential part of this project is the organization of training and advanced training of tour operators, tourism facilities and related infrastructure. Tourists will start travelling individually, and, choosing a destination, can book what they need to travel online. Participants in the tourist market need to focus on the creation of new touristic destinations. Considering, the demand, to offer new tourist products for potential visitors of the country. To date, 2079 architectural monuments and 4308 archaeological sites are under state protection in Uzbekistan (Cultural Heritage of Uzbekistan, nd). To restore the tourism industry and increase the demand for tourist services, at the initial stage, work is underway to develop the country’s infrastructure and develop new areas in tourism.

2. Results

During the pandemic, the whole world realized that the future of humanity is dependent on science and medicine, that medicine is the sector on which people’s lives depend. In turn, there is an opportunity for the development of such a direction as medical tourism in the tourist market. After the quarantine was completed, when the borders were opened again, humanity realized the need for care and health reinforcement and the medical tourism industry is growing in demand.

Medical tourism in Uzbekistan is a young and successfully developing local tourism area. Today, there are a large number of private clinics in the Republic equipped with modern medical equipment, offering inpatient and outpatient services, surgical treatment and dental care at attractive prices, most of these clinics also accept international insurance. Most enormous flow of arrivals to Uzbekistan for rehabilitation and medical services over the past ten years has been observed among tourists from CIS countries. 40% of the total number of tourists who arrived turned to alternative medicine services (The largest flow..., 2021). From this pie chat we can observe the flow of tourists from CIS countries in the period from 2011 till

2021 years (Figure 1). Mostly travellers for treatment came from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

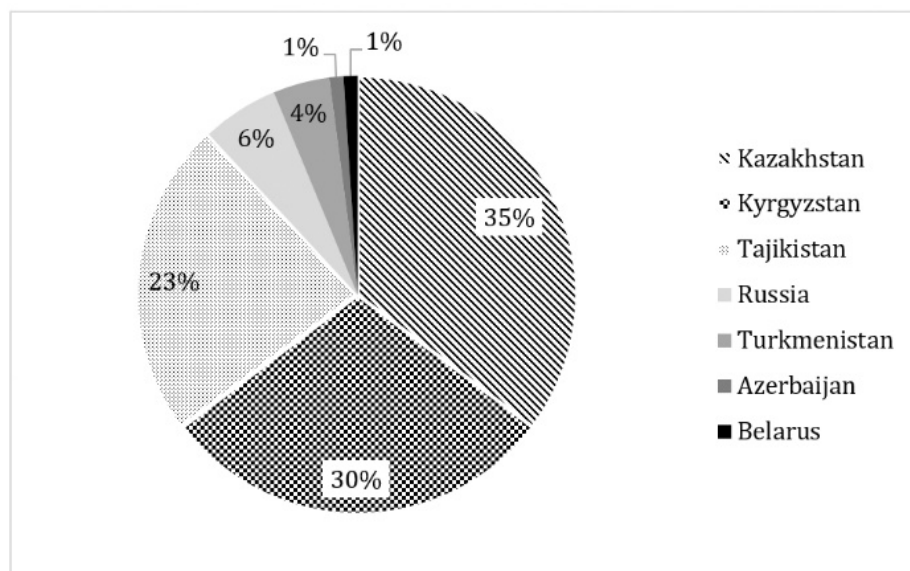


Figure 1. Statistical data of tourists arriving from the CIS countries on medical tourism for 2011–2021

Medical centres in the regions (Tashkent region, Surkhandarya region, Fergana region), where there are mineral springs beneficial for the gastrointestinal tract with qualified specialists working there are in demand. Treatment in Uzbekistan will be a convenient option for foreigners travelling in Central Asia or temporarily residing in its territory. Sanatorium “Zaamin” – convenient location and mountain air of the Jizzakh region turn a miracle health resort into a real picturesque corner. It is here that mud treatment procedures are carried out, and therapeutic mud is brought from Lake Balykli. The picturesque mountain landscape of Zaamin, clean air and plenty of sun are ideal conditions for carrying out preventive procedures for children and adults with respiratory diseases. High-quality, inexpensive laboratory tests, diagnostic tests and basic medical procedures can be easily included in your travel schedule. It is known from history that it was in Uzbekistan that the brilliant doctor Avicenna’s was born, whose name is known and revered worldwide. The works he wrote laid the fundamental foundation for the study of medicine. Avicenna's name is still alive in

Uzbekistan. That is, those who prefer alternative methods of treatment will appreciate qualified specialists of Uzbekistan offering acupuncture, hirudotherapy, mud therapy, water and spa treatments, climatotherapy, homeopathic treatment and massage therapy. So, for example, in the Fergana region of Uzbekistan, at the entrance to it from the Kokand side, there is a remarkable area - the Buva Bastom. This part of the region is an arid desert with migrating sand dunes (there is very little sand left at the moment). Psammotherapy (translated from Latin – sand treatment) was known in ancient times. Hot sand treatment is mentioned in the writings of Herodotus, Galen and Avicenna. There is evidence that the Mayan Indians also knew about this amazing method. At the end of the century before last, psammotherapy began to spread in European countries, in particular, in Dresden Dr. Fleming opened the first psammotherapy clinic, in which various diseases of the joints were successfully treated. In Russia, the first who began to use psammotherapy was the famous doctor Nikolai Vasilyevich Pariysky, and in 1889 he even wrote a work on the benefits of sand baths for healing and strengthening the body. One such sandy place also surrounds the mausoleum of Bastom Buva. The village has its own history. Here is the mausoleum of one of the sheikhs of the 11th–12th centuries, Hozha Baezid Bastomiy. The mausoleum is considered one of the holy places, which is visited every year by thousands of people from all over our country, not only for pilgrimage purposes. Sand is recognized as curative, people suffering from arthritis, kidney diseases, infertility find their healing here.

The sanatorium “Bastom buva” (Buwaydinsky district of the Fergana region) is also located in this area. The sanatorium is distinguished by the fact that the treatment is carried out using mineral water with a temperature of 80 °C, obtained from a depth of 2850 meters, which belongs to the group of iodine-bromine therapeutic waters. The source contains 21 elements of medicinal salts. Healing water is a cure for many diseases.

Khoja Ubbon is located on a small hill of Rauza in a very large frame building. Outside, there are tall, vertically placed tugs at all four corners. These structures were built no earlier than the middle of the last century. A complex of buildings adjoins the mazar (burial place): an extensive mekhmonkhona (living room), a mosque. “Chashma Khan” is a burnt brick building. The building is divided into two parts, each covered with a dome. There is a well in the western half of the building, with slightly bitter water.

The mausoleum of the revered Saint Khoja Ubbon is located in the Bukhara region. According to legend, from the age of 15, Khoja Ubbon lived in

seclusion in the desert, near a spring. Here he lived until old age, was revered as a skilled healer, to whom people disfigured by a severe skin ailment were attracted.

People coming from different places, often very remote, live here, away from civilization for 2–3 months. The effect of such treatment exceeds expectations, and therefore the flow of people who want be cured of the disease does not stop.

The Mazar of Khoja Zaffaron is a cult complex in which a well with sacred water occupies a special place. This place is well known to residents of the surrounding villages and districts. The study of the water showed the presence of various valuable minerals in it. From time immemorial, patients with jaundice have come here to be treated. According to an ancient legend, Zaffaron was the mentor of Khoja Ubbon. There is a legend that Zaffaron is the son of Caliph Uthmon.

The history of the origin of this place is fascinating; at one time, Genghis Khan came to the Uzbek lands, ordered to gather all those suffering from leprosy in an area near Samarkand, vitiligo patients also got there, no one understood why, the Uzbeks who lived in the direction of Samarkand and Bukhara were very scared of what was happening. So, at that time, a wealthy man lived in that area, his nine-year-old son began to have vitiligo, which progressed rapidly. Being afraid of evil tongues, the father ordered the servants to leave the boy in the desert, but the boy did not die. He was found by a local tabib (healer) who lived in the desert and treated people. Having picked up the boy, he left him at home, the boy helped with the housework, drank from the chashma (spring), tanned and the vitiligo spot disappeared. Since then people have been coming to these places for treatment.

The treatment process includes: drinking well water (bitterly salty in taste) and sunbathing. From 7.00 to 10.00 and from 16.00 to 19.00. Of course, all this at first glance looks quite bland and resembles the Middle Ages – an abandoned village (hamlet) consisting of small adobe barracks divided into small rooms in which 3–5 people live and cook their own food. Sunbathing is taken on takyrs (dry clay areas with fractured surfaces) between low sandy mounds. The territory is conditionally divided into two parts-male and female. In the second half of 2022, a world-class Silk Road Samarkand resort with a medical and business cluster will open in Samarkand. The complex is positioned as unique not only for Uzbekistan but also for the entire Central Asian region. Four hotels will be located in the medical cluster of the resort under the Wellness Park Hotel brand. Each of these boutique

hotels will have its medical specialization. The first is preventive medicine (preventive direction), the second is detox, the third is restorative medicine with rejuvenation programs, and the fourth is respiratory medicine. All crafts of Uzbekistan will be collected on the territory. Its guests will be able to touch the history and traditions of the country, get acquainted with its colourful heritage. Artisans will “settle” on the streets of this ethno town, who will show and tell everything about the ancient crafts of Samarkand and the whole of Uzbekistan. You will be able to see wood carvings, watch pottery, silk paper making, jewellery and carpets.

The Republic of Uzbekistan is a secular state where representatives of various religions and faiths live. According to official data, 2,225 religious organizations and 16 different religious denominations have been registered in the country (Uzbekistan – religions and confessions, nd).

As a result, there are a considerable number of ancient sites, objects and architectural monuments that cover all religions of the world. So, one of such architectural monuments can be called the Cathedral of the “Sacred Heart of Jesus”, which is well known as the “Polish Church”. The temple, located in the city of Tashkent, belongs to the Roman Catholic Apostolic Administration and is considered to be in operation today. The Roman Catholic Church is very popular not only in our country but also all over the world since this architectural structure was built before the First World War and has been repeatedly reconstructed over a century of existence.

The following example is the Cathedral of the Assumption of the Mother of God, also known as the Holy Dormition Cathedral, is the Orthodox cathedral of the diocese of the Russian Orthodox Church in Tashkent, where various religious events are held annually and Orthodox holidays are widely celebrated.

A real example of a religious trend that was widely spread in the territory of present-day Uzbekistan, particularly, from Khorezm region of the country, are the monuments of Zoroastrianism. Many scientists and researchers consider Central Asia, and in particular ancient Khorezm, the birthplace of Zoroastrianism and its prophet Zarathustra. Archaeological research links the Zoroastrian doctrine and its worship of fire and natural elements with the religious views of the primitive Khorezmians. Thus, by visiting our country, you can see with your own eyes where the religion of Zoroastrianism originated from.

3. Discussion

The revival of the “Great Silk Road” is of great importance in the history and culture of the country. The main tourist route intersects with 32 large and small cities of Central Asia. Noteworthy is the fact that there are more than 7 thousand historical monuments in Uzbekistan, many of which are included in the UNESCO World Heritage List (The Great Silk Road, nd). Among them are such pearls of the East as the cities of Samarkand, Bukhara, Khiva, Shakhrisabz, Tashkent, Kokand and Termez.

Recent events that happened in neighbouring States: the terrorist attack in Kazakhstan and the unstable political situation in Afghanistan may negatively affect the influx of tourists to Uzbekistan. It should be noted that the Republic of Uzbekistan is among the top 10 countries in the world in terms of security (Uzbekistan has entered ..., 2020). Uzbekistan is a country of safe tourism. This is indicated by statistical data. In 2019, Uzbekistan entered the top five safest countries in the world for single tourists. These data were presented in the annual report of the online travel service Wegoplace (Tourist police, nd).

In June 2019, the Tourism Safety Department was organized, which currently employs more than 40 employees. In parallel with Tashkent, in the same year, departments for safe tourism were formed in Samarkand, Bukhara and other cities.

Conclusion

The task of the tourist police is to create safe conditions for the stay of foreign tourists who sincerely want to get acquainted with our unique country and, of course, from its best side.

The tourism business of Uzbekistan is on the path of a radical rethinking of existing business models, the creation of new tourist destinations, as well as through the introduction of innovations and digitalization into the industry. The tourism industry has always been and will be in demand, especially after a long self-isolation, a huge number of people want to go on a trip, discover the unknown or retire with nature.

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