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Kazakhstan as a new destination for tourism and business in opinions of international visitors to ASTANA EXPO 2017

Abstract

During the International EXPO 2017 ASTANA, Kazakhstan, research among international visitors was conducted to get insights about their view of Kazakhstan as a new destination for tourism and business. The research was based on anonymous questionnaires, consisting of 30 questions, in English and Russian, collected either in writing or on-line. 69 questionnaires were collected, the answers belonging to representatives of 27 countries. Most of the concerns referred to the barriers for further development of international tourism in Kazakhstan, about possible points of interests, and recommendations for further improvement.

Key words: Expo, Astana, Kazakhstan, tourism development, doing business, international visitor opinions

In occasion of the International EXPO 2017¹ held in Astana—the capital of Kazakhstan—from June 10 to September 10, 2017, a research among the international visitors was conducted to get insights about their opinion about Kazakhstan as a new destination for tourism and business. The concept of the research was developed by the author and was accomplished in cooperation with the Polish Section of ASTANA EXPO 2017.² The interviewees were assured to be anonymous and were informed that their answers will of great assistance for better planning of future events in Kazakhstan and beyond.

The research was based on a questionnaire consisting of 30 questions, both structured (multiple choice) and semi-structured (open with a possibility of individual comments). The questionnaire was bilingual (English and Russian), and was available on-line using a Google Form platform. In total, 69 answers have been collected, most of them due to the efforts of the team of the Polish Pavilion at the ASTANA EXPO. Cooperation with one single pavilion, the Polish one, had some impact on the results of the research, in the sense that visitors from Poland are overrepresented within the interviewees. Nevertheless, heterogeneity of geographical representation of the interviewees has been obtained. There were representatives of as many as 27 countries, including: Australia (1), Austria (3), Belgium (4), Canada (1), China (3), Djibouti (2), Finland (1), France (1), Georgia (1), Germany (6), Italy (3), Kyrgyzstan (2), New Zealand (1), Poland (17), Romania (1), Russia (3), Singapore (1), Slovakia (1), Spain (1), Sweden (1), The Netherlands (1), Qatar (1), United Kingdom (1), USA (7), Republic of Korea (1), Ukraine (3), Uzbekistan (1). There was an equal representation of genders (34 men and 35 women).

¹ International Expos are being organized by the The Bureau International des Expositions (BIE) [see: <http://www.bie-paris.org/site/en/>]. The BIE currently regulates 4 types of Exhibitions: World Expos, International Specialized Expos, Horticultural Exhibitions and the Triennale di Milano. Each in its own field aims at educating the public, sharing innovation, promoting progress and allowing dialogue and shared experience. They are an extraordinary way to reach out to a broad audience and a place where influencers, experts, the civil society and political representatives can work together. The Expo Astana 2017 falls into the category International Specialized Expos.

² Polish Section of ASTANA EXPO 2017 (<https://expo.gov.pl/>) was supervised by the Commissioner Mr. Andrzej Stefański. Research cooperation was coordinated by Mr. Jerzy Dzikowicki, a representative of the Polish Chamber of Commerce in Warsaw.

Young people prevailed among the interviewees, those between 19-25 were the biggest group (Fig. 1). For the majority of persons taking part in the research (71%) it was a first time to visit Kazakhstan, for 8,7% it was a second visit, for 18,8% it was a third time (see Fig. 2).

Fig. 1. What is your age group?

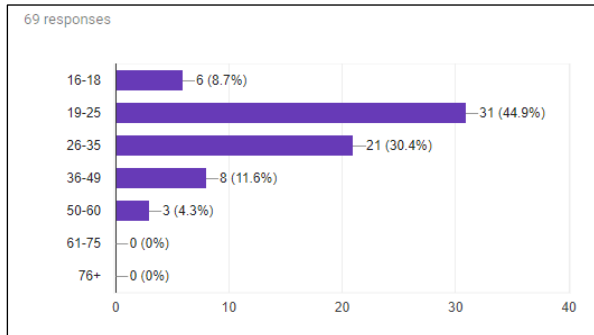
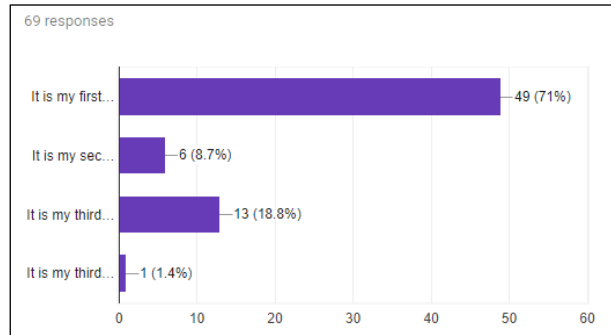


Fig. 2. How many times did you visit Kazakhstan?



Unsurprisingly, the main objective for a visit to Kazakhstan was related to attending EXPO as a visitor (31,9%) and a professional e.g. an exhibitor, speaker or operator of logistics at the event (36,2%). The next most important reason for visiting Kazakhstan was sightseeing (24,6%), 8,7 % came as press, business or trade was the motive declared by 6%, and 4,3% of interviewees were there for family reasons. Other objectives were declared by 14,6%.

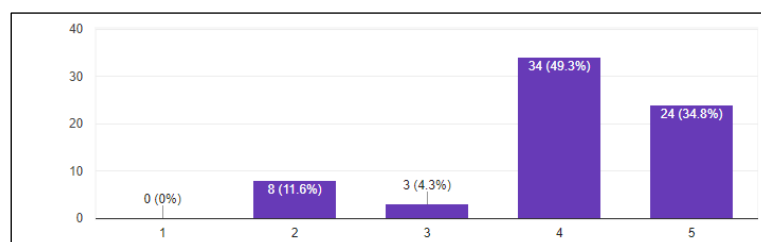
Astana and Almaty are the top cities most frequently visited in Kazakhstan. The other locations visited by the international guests were: Karaganda, Pavlodar, Toldykorgan, Shymkent, Aralsk, Borovoye, Koday, Turkestan, Burabay, Charyn Kanyon, Lake Kaindy, Lake Kolsai, Kostanay, Rudnyi, Aktobe, Altai, Korgalzhyn, Ust-Kamenogorsk, Balgash, North Region (Kokshetau) Petropavlovsk, East Kazakhstan (Semey, Oskemen), Saryagash. Just 7,2% of the interviewees declared that on their visit to Kazakhstan they will visit only Astana.

The majority of the qualitative research was related to the visitors' opinions on a number of questions.

For the question if there was any surprise upon visiting Kazakhstan for the first time, only 17% of the guests answered "No". What was surprising: friendliness and kindness of people ("They are always smiling and trying to help. They are willing to show their country to the world"; "Hospitality of every people all around the country"). Secondly: modernity of Kazakhstan ("Astana and its technology, skyscrapers and big roads"; "Astana is western style city", "EXPO"; "It appeared to be more developed than I thought"). Thirdly: beauty of the country ("Beauty of the mountains", "a lot of impressive places", "nature"). Other comments are related to the fact that Astana is such a new and clean city. Some comments about contrasts: "A lot of modern buildings, but not many people on the street"; "Urbanism for cars only". A comment regarding local tradition: "They eat horse meat there!".

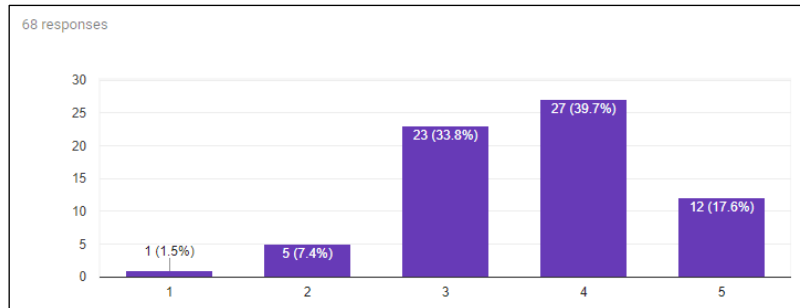
The next question was "How attractive is Kazakhstan as a destination?" As many as 84% of interviewees evaluated Kazakhstan as very attractive, while nobody said the country is not attractive (See Fig. 3 below).

Fig. 3. How attractive is Kazakhstan as a destination for visiting?



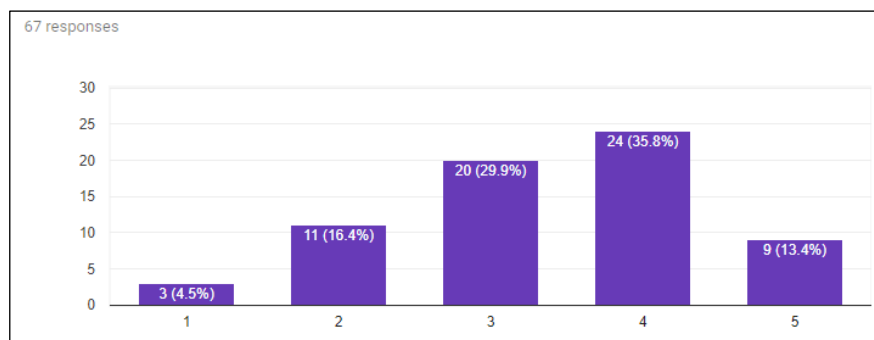
The opinions about accommodation were more scattered. 72% rate the level of accommodation as good or acceptable, in addition to 17,6% valued it as excellent. Some 8% estimated accommodation as not good or with some problems (Fig. 4).

Fig. 4. What is your opinion on accommodation in Kazakhstan?



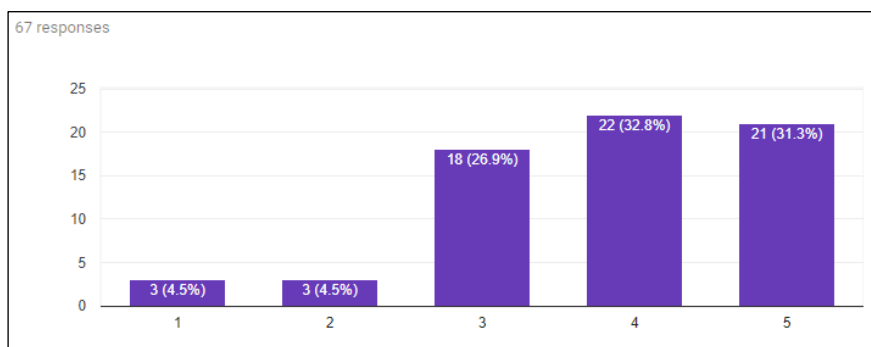
The prices of hotels in Kazakhstan were considered as mostly “attractive” (35,8%) or “very attractive” (13,4%). For 4,5% the prices were not attractive, and for 16,4% “somewhat attractive”. Almost 30% has no opinion, which most likely means that delegates to EXPO ASTANA that were not directly involved in the bookings (Fig. 5).

Fig. 5. How do you rate prices of hotels in Kazakhstan?



The quality of food in Kazakhstan has been overwhelmingly (48%) assessed as good or excellent, and for the next 30% was acceptable. 16,4% found “some problems” with food, and for 4,5% it was “not good” (Fig. 6).

Fig. 6. How do you evaluate food quality in Kazakhstan?

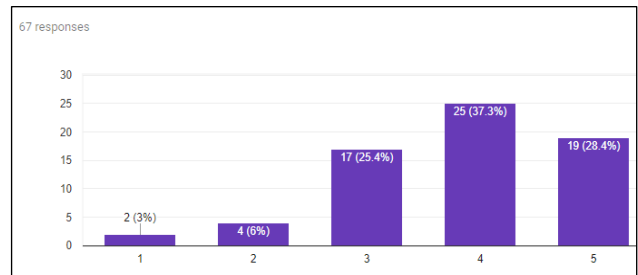
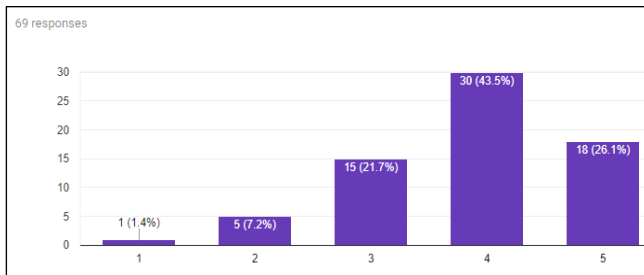


The question regarding security and safety shows that most people (50,7%) did not have any fears before arriving to Kazakhstan. What created some concerns? “Stan-phobia”, “Communism system”, “Borat country? Bad guys / Russian mentality?”. However: “Some of my friends were unhappy with me traveling to this part of the World and judging it with no personal experience, but I was very excited to experience the culture and to see what the country is about”. The second group were related to potential language problems, but at the same time somebody wrote “Worried about language barrier but, surprisingly, the majority of Kazakhs is fluent in English”. One guest stated: “I was scared of driving in the inner city because the Kazakh traffic is much more reckless and unpredictable compared to the German style of driving”.

In the opinion of 69,5% of international visitors Kazakhstan is safe or very safe, only for 1,5% the country is not safe, while 7,2% see “some problems” with it. Almost 22% of interviewees had no opinion to this extend (Fig. 7). In quite similar way Kazakhstan has been assessed in terms of friendliness to female tourists. 65,6% of answers pointed out that Kazakhstan is friendly or very friendly to female visitors, while 3% considered the country as not friendly, and 6% as “somewhat friendly to female tourists (Fig. 8).³

Fig. 7. Do you consider Kazakhstan as a safe country?

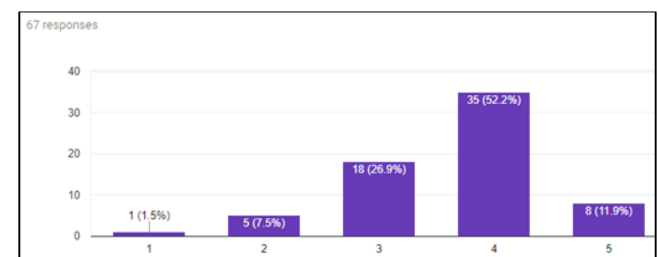
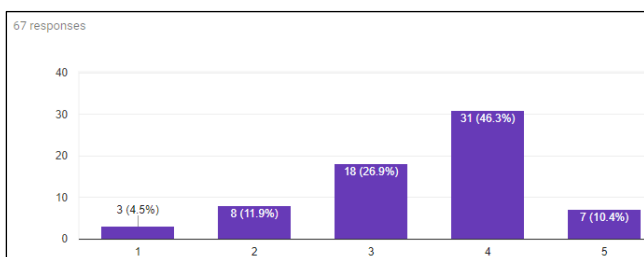
Fig. 8. Do you consider Kazakhstan as a country friendly to female tourists?



The following issues are related to modernity and technologies. Kazakhstan has been considered as friendly or very friendly to young visitors (79,1% of answers), but only 56,7% decided that the country is prepared as a place with new technologies--the issue vitally important to new generations (Fig. 9). For 4,5% of interviewees Kazakhstan is not prepared, and for 12% is only somewhat prepared. 64,1% considered Kazakhstan as place prepared or very well prepared to run events with interaction and engagement with participants. Only 1,5% expressed the opinion that the country is not prepared, 7,5% as “somewhat prepared” (Fig. 10). In both above questions, some 27% had no opinion.

Fig. 9. Would you rate Kazakhstan as a place well prepared with new technologies?

Fig. 10. Do you consider Kazakhstan prepared to run events with interactions and engagement with participants?



The ASTANA EXPO 2017 was a suitable occasion to ask what new creative themes and trending topics one have you found in Kazakhstan. The Expo itself has been considered as creative and

³ See also an interesting initiative stressing the role of women in Expo: <http://expoandwomen.com/ru/dvadtsat-pyat-faktorov-aktualnosti-provedeniya-vystavki-ekspo-2017/>

trendy, along with its leading idea of Future Energy.⁴ Some quotes: “The topic of Expo is charming, because this problem of alternative sources of energy is on the first place”. “I was waiting a year to attend the 2017 World Expo in Astana”. “It was very interesting and so much to see”. “I had lot of fun! Each country was different and had their own way of conveying their new green technologies”. “I wasn't able to see everything, but what I saw was pretty cool”.

Construction industry was considered as another attractive topic: “New buildings everywhere”. “Unusual/brave design”. “I have looked at some brutalist art”. “I like the small shops. Found the architectural contrasts very interesting.”

Indigenous Kazakh traditions draw a lot of interests of the international guests. They listed local products: horse meat, kumys, shubat, besparmak, kurt, bread. Excerpts: “Nomadic history and ayran”, “Cold drinks everywhere”, “A huge selection of meat dishes”.

The traditions were equally important as modernity: “The frequent use of social media websites as a medium for startup business ventures was - in its scale - new to me, and unprecedented in its extent”. “2GIS - great APP!” „Smartphones, apps; fashion (Almaty), and sports”.

For the question what is Kazakhstan's current economic situation the answers were diversified.

The positive opinions were prevailing: “Good. Quite good. Rich. Stable. Seems to be good, I think it is pretty good. Very nice, they have a lot International communications. I think the economy in KZ is good. Good, one of the best. In my opinion, Kazakhstan is growing so fast”.

Many interviewees stressed the potential of the country. “Kazakhstan has a great potential, for example the Expo”, “Very favorable conditions”; “I believe that Kazakhstan has a lot of potential, because it has so many things and places to offer. Moreover, the people are very friendly and are always willing to help you out”. Numerous answers underlined the dynamics: “Recovering from the economic crisis”; “It is not a secret that the national currency's value has been dropping significantly. However, the economic situation is not bad”; “Decent, but with high unemployment rate”; “There are still some issues, but it's developing every day”; “I did not see any very serious problems in the economy of Kazakhstan because nowadays the economy is growing”.

Some hesitations followed: “It's very easy to get around and not too expensive”; “There are some options available, but more would be better”; “Reasonable chances for development, however it would be better if more people spoke English”; “I think that citizens had a big opportunity to start up”; “Doing business is a bit difficult because of the language barrier but they are very open to new opportunities to showing their country to the rest of the world”.

Some interviewees present their opinion in relatively: “Doing good in Central Asia. Better than other countries in region. It's better than 10 years ago. The situation has improved significantly. Looking at the situation in Astana and Almaty, I'd say that the economic situation in KZ is rapidly flourishing”. Many stressed the development: “Good one (situation) and developing. It's developing. It is an emerging country with quite stable economics. Developing country with social equality. A developing, young economy with big potential in the future”.

However, there were also some reluctant or unfavorable opinions: “Not good. Bad. Stagnant. Poor. Average. Medium”. Among the more developed answers several issues were addressed. One of them are social differences: “There are differences between wealthy people and lower class. Middle class needs to make efforts to set welfare”. Another one is oil dependency and unstable currency: “Visibly rich, but the oil price is causing major currency fluctuations. Oil-dependent, it requires diversification.

⁴ See more about EXPO Astana 2017 <https://expo2017astana.com/en/>; and http://www.inform.kz/en/foreigners-share-their-impressions-of-expo-2017-and-astana_a3036253

Inflation and still strong dependency of oil. Currency fluctuations bring some uncertainty so the currency stability is rather unpredictable”⁵.

Discrepancies were seen among existing problems: “There is big gap between the wealth of Kazakhstan’s cities and its villages”; “I think it’s similar to Azerbaijan: beautiful cities and quite poor villages”; “Besides the cities, the rest of the country is poor”; “Polarized - extreme wealth held in the hand of a few”; “Gaps between rich cities and the countryside”. Some optimistic elements: “strong service sector” and “young creative population”. At the same time: “sometimes you can meet a lack of education”; “Rapid growth, but they need to invest more on education”. The list of comments can be well summarized with a sentence: “Not so bad, but I think after Expo 2017 in Astana economic situation of KZ will begin to improve”.⁶

The next question was related to assessment of the ease of doing business in the field of tourism.

There were many positives: “A lot of incentives to do business in tourism and travel”; “Tourism and travel develops”; “In my opinion, East Kazakhstan region has a giant tourism potential”; “I asses it as a place ripe for new business opportunities and a growing tourism sector”; “I got the impression that the tourism industry in the country or a big city like Almaty is steadily growing thus creating a demand for more tourism-oriented businesses. As a result, I believe it has gotten easier to establish oneself in the tourism industry on a small scale”.

The shortcomings in promotion: “Tourism mostly through word-of-mouth”; “Hope doing more connections”; “It is a beautiful country but the tourism sector is not well developed here. For example, Kyrgyzstan invests in tourism and promotion much more”. “There is a huge potential in places such as Charyn Canyon or Kaindy Lake but I see no promotion of tourism here”. “Kazakhstan brings association with *doing business* at first, being an oil-rich (and other natural resources) country secondly and, the last but not least, it may be known by its modern architecture (especially Astana)”; “It has a great potential mostly due to a well-developed transport system”.

The negatives: “It’s not easy”; “Bureaucratic obstacles”; “Different business culture”; “Difficult, languages issues, visa issues, sometimes trouble with police”; “Complicated (language barriers, corruption)”; “Too much red tape (bureaucracy)”; “Not recommended”; “Probably difficult – lots of red tape included in finance and logistics”; “Not very easy, because of the distances between cities attractive for tourists”; “Prices for flight are high and service is poor”. Some blunt comments: “30% success” and “3 out of 4”.

Recommendations for future development: “We’d like to travel as backpackers and we didn’t find enough options. In my opinion, it could be a good opportunity”. “I know that the government has lots of programs for start-ups. For example, there is one program that offers business courses for free. The other one is about giving sponsorship to start”. “And the main resource for tourism business is nature with beautiful places. You can find these places easily”.⁷

Then people were asked the question what kind of help from any institutions would be necessary to support their decision of traveling to Kazakhstan. For many such help is not needed as “It’s very easy country for traveling”. However, among expected forms were: a Convention Bureau, international museum events, conferences, the work and travel program, direct flights, access to

⁵ See: Socio-economic development of the Republic of Kazakhstan. January-December 2017. Astana 2018.

Committee on Statistics of Ministry of National Economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan; and www.stat.gov.kz

⁶ See expectations of the World Bank for KZ in 2017: <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2017/05/17/kazakhstans-economy-to-accelerate-in-2017-says-world-bank>

⁷ Compare sources: official tourism industry statistics of the country, and a plan of development of tourism in KZ: http://stat.gov.kz/faces/wcnav_externalId/homeNumbersTourism?_adf.ctrl-state=zqshnopi2_119&_afLoop=1343578425493156#%40%3F_afLoop%3D1343578425493156%26_adf.ctrl-state%3Djxgiltjr_63; and <https://primeminister.kz/en/news/all/15380>. See also a controversial article “Why tourists do not go to Kazakhstan”: Schreiber D. (2018).

medicines known from their homelands. Also “Help from my university” and “just a co-operation between governments” were mentioned. Better promotion of the country was advised: “more info in English in websites about Kazakhstan”, “If Kazakhstan will organize a lot of events like Expo, Universiade⁸, Asiada⁹, their traveling position will grow up”. Several persons mentioned problems with visas and registrations¹⁰. “Help with visas and paperwork if staying over 30 days or not during EXPO time”; “The registration process should be cancelled”. They noticed the current ease with visas to Kazakhstan: “I like that fact that I wouldn’t have to pay for the entry visa anymore”. It necessary to stress that so called “registration” seems to be particularly not clear. According to a Migration Card provided to every foreigner at the border entry: “Foreign citizens must register with a local migration police office within five calendar days”. Some travel advisory websites underline necessity of checking numerous sources to get valid information: “Be aware that you may be fined, asked for a bribe or go to jail at any time during your stay in Kazakhstan for not registering properly, even if you don’t have to register at all or have registered properly in the first place. (...) In 2017, there has been an increase in bribes solicited from tourists by police officers. This may well have to do with the general increase in foreign tourists in Kazakhstan rather than anything else, though. We would also like to stress that most people will not notice any of this and will breeze through the country without issues”.¹¹

Some additional comments regarding existing obstacles for foreign visitors: “need to speak their language or get a translator”; “take the money in international currency”; “KZ should improve its marketing, as it’s NOT a Borat Country”¹². It is worth mentioning, that the postulate of the simplification of visa procedures is included in the official recommendations of the government of Kazakhstan for its tourist department.¹³

“How do you see the position of Kazakhstan in comparison to other emerging markets?” was the next question. “High position in the region”, “Leader”, “Better than neighbors”, “More open than other Central Asian markets— less than other regions of the world”.

Some more excerpts: “It is rapidly growing compared to other former USSR countries I’ve visited. Its culturally rich and geographically advantaged nature allows for a growing exchange with its neighboring countries while the younger generation of Kazakhs seems to be full of creative and innovative ideas in the fields of art, design, technology all the while expressing a (generally) open-minded and (by Western standards) progressive world view”. “I was surprised with the position of Kazakhstan. I consider it a potential market but they need to improve their English. It’s difficult to communicate with them”. “Kazakhstan’s main profit comes from oil. That is why the market situation depends on dollar rate and oil price. It needs to diversify its economy. If cannot just rely on oil and gas extraction. The development of industries and service sector apart of oil will be challenging. Other countries seem to be more diversified in their development strategies”.

⁸ Asiada - Asian Winter Games was a multi sporting event that was held in Astana and Almaty, Kazakhstan and that began on January 30, 2011 and ended on February 6, 2011. It was the first time that Kazakhstan hosted such a large event since independence from the Soviet Union. See:

http://www.akorda.kz/en/national_projects/7th-asian-winter-games

⁹ The Universiade is an international multi-sport event, organized for university athletes by the International University Sports Federation (FISU). In June-February 2017 the Winter Universiade was held in Kazakhstan in the city of Almaty. See: https://forbes.kz/photostory/zimnyaya_universiada-2017_ofitsialno_obyavlena_zakryitoy

¹⁰ For current visa regulations you may visit: http://egov.kz/cms/en/articles/rk_visa_obtaining; and <https://www.defacto.kz/content/poluchenie-vizy-respubliki-kazakhstan>

¹¹ <https://caravanistan.com/visa/kazakhstan/registration-ovir>;

<http://www.kazakhstan-discovery.com/kazakhstan-visa.html>;

<https://www.advantour.com/kazakhstan/visa.htm>

¹² Referring to a scandalous American comedy (2006) of a fictional character with that name.

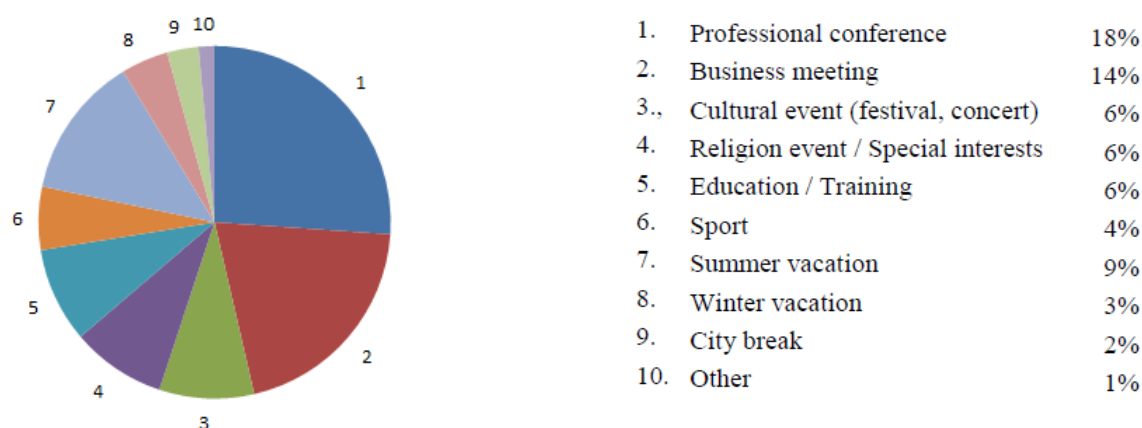
¹³ <https://www.facebook.com/Committee-on-Tourism-Industry-Kazakhstan-233946840457116/>

Finally: “I wouldn’t be surprised if I see KZ among the countries with developed market in a couple of years. Kazakhstan has to do its best, though”.

For the question regarding reasons for travel to Kazakhstan most of the answers combined more than one reason. For 35% it was “doing business” and “visiting friends” and for another 20% it was “attending EXPO/conference” and “tourism (sightseeing)”. Some 18% declared only “business” or “tourism” (15%).

The next question: “What would you come to Kazakhstan for...?” providing a list of options (Fig. 11). The most frequently potential goal for the visit Kazakhstan was “Professional conference” (26%) and “Business meeting” (20%). “Cultural event / festival / concert” and “Religion event /special interests” followed (both 9%). “Education/training” would be a motive for also 9%, while “Sport” was selected by 6% of interviewees. “Summer vacation” could be a motive for 13% of participants of the research, but “Winter vacation” only for 4% of them. “City breaks” in Kazakhstan seems to be attractive only to 3% of international guests, “Visiting friends or family” for 1%. Nobody declared “Shopping” as a motive for the visit.

Fig. 11. Motives for a next visit to Kazakhstan



What products or services were missing or difficult for you to find in Kazakhstan? Several issues have been addressed. Access to on-line payment amenities: “Cash exchange”; “To pay with a card”; “In many shops it is impossible to pay by card so it is not convenient”. Transportation: “Taxi paid by credit card”, “It’s hard to find a cheap taxi”, “Hard to get a train ticket - possible only in advance”; “I would say that public transport is one of the difficult things, because of its quality”; “In comparison with my town (Singapore) public buses are in unsanitary condition and always crowded”.

Opinions on services: “English speaking staff and service (bad)”; Western trained medical personnel at hospitals”,

Availability of some food products: “Not every product is easy to find in shops”, “Fruits and vegetables at a good quality”; “Good coffee, organic food”; “Difficult to find good vegetarian food”; “diet drinks (coke)”; “my favorite yoghurt” “a good kebab”; “water drinkable”; “exotic fruits”; “some kind of sweets”, “sea food”, “pork meat”; “fast food; “It seemed to be hard to find good quality food in inexpensive restaurants”, “specific German products, bakeries, bananas”. Two times the lack of maps as a basic material for any visitor was mentioned. Problems with cosmetics was listed three times. And finally: “It is difficult to find a Catholic church”.

Two quotes for the summary: “Customer service wasn't great in many places but most services and products were available”; WiFi/internet connection was not so good in rural areas, but generally everything was fine”.

Were there any unpleasant situations in Kazakhstan? 68,8% of participants said “No”. Examples: “Generally, European countries are better-organized. But it may be the contrast between the Eastern and Western mentalities”; “I have some problems with workers in a grocery store and with banking system. They need to invest in the service sector”, “Communication difficulties. Problems with driving in Kazakhstan”, “Lines are non-existent”, “Taxi service arguing about the price”.

“Normal criminality of metropolitan city: people tried to rob me in a cab”; “Once I got robbed in a bus”; “Corrupted policemen!”; “Witnessed bribery”. Other important opinion: “Men have a bad behavior”. Several times people showed their concerns regarding healthcare: “I have experienced some health issues because of dehydration”.

What could be better organized? What can be improved?

Predominantly: transport and the level of services (“Taxi service - arguing about price”). Regarding language: “could be a barrier, but it's funny, too”. “First of all, bureaucracy level shall be much lower”, it refers also to excess of official procedures. Touristic infrastructure: “A bigger hostel infrastructure in Astana”; “Tourism companies, information, promotion”; “More English signs and information offices”. “Credit card service” what it's especially important for foreigners and healthcare system. Improvement of traffic lights to avoid traffic jams (“especially in Almaty city”).

Environmental issues were spotted several times: “I have noticed that Kazakhstan citizens do not care a lot about recycling”; “There are trash bins for all kind of rubbish, not segregated”; “I couldn't find any product with a recycling sign”.

Some comments addressing the situation on the premises of Expo: “Interactive maps on the territory of EXPO”, “Organization of events, lines”, “Quality of service and food”, “Expo villages including staff for kitchen”, “Staff could be more friendly, especially Expo village staff”, “High prices at the Expo”, “Lack of outside terraces”.

Will you recommend visiting Kazakhstan to your friends/colleagues?

79,7% answered “Yes”. “Undoubtedly, I will recommend visiting Kazakhstan. I have been doing it constantly since 2011!”. “Kazakhstan is a really nice place with amazing people, so I'd recommend my friends to stop with the stereotyping and prejudice and see everything with their own eyes”.

Some voices with the opposite attitude: “Only if you have special purpose”, “Only for traveling”, “For short period of time”; “I think no”, “No”, “Everywhere but Astana”, “May be for experience”.

Do you plan to visit Kazakhstan again? For what objective?

90% expressed affirmative opinion, many of them for numerous business meetings. Among planned goals are: Almaty, Turkestan, To see mountains, nature, “I'm going to visit KZ in my winter vacation for mountain tourism”; “I want to come here with friends”.. “To visit Mangystau and the Caspian Sea. But with my own vehicle”; “For my photographic projects”; “To see the country development in the future”, “For such events as EXPO”.

Do you want to see other cities/regions in Kazakhstan? Which one? For what objective? Besides Astana as site of EXPO, the city of Almaty were present in almost every answer. “Almaty - cultural heart of this country”, “because it's an active city”, “old capital”. Other popular locations: Shymkent, Aktau, Karaganda (“for business”), Aral Lake, Baikonur (“my personal interest in the research on space exploration done there”), Borovoe, Taraz, Kostanay, Ekibastuz, Semey (“for sightseeing”). Also: “I would like to see Atyrau and Aktau”; “Altai mountains for sport”; “Lake Balkhash, Kokshetau, Pavlodar and West of Kazakhstan, because there are awesome places to visit”, “Natural parks and cultural heritage on the South of the country”.

Summary

According to this research, Kazakhstan is considered as an attractive destination for tourism. The EXPO 2017 in Astana has been considered as creative and trendy, together with its leading idea of Future Energy.

An important factor for the image of Kazakhstan is its leading role in the region of Central Asia. Numerous issues concerned the visitors, including unstable currency, lack of diversification of the economy and its dependency of oil, level of services, as well as bureaucracy and corruption. The opinions about accommodation were scattered, however prices of hotels were considered as mostly attractive. The quality of food in Kazakhstan has been assessed as good or excellent. 50,7% of the interviewees did not have any fears before arriving to Kazakhstan. For the first time visitors there were not many surprises. A surprising factor: the friendliness and kindness of Kazakh people.

According to the guests' opinions several products or services were missing or difficult for to find. Access to on-line payment amenities and the medium level of services, including transport, are the biggest issues. Language barrier was often mentioned. Medical services are considered as an important issue for the visitor from abroad. Several persons mentioned problems with visas and local registrations.

The shortcomings in promotion of the country, including inefficient info centers, printed maps, and English version websites. The research showed also some expectations regarding availability of well-known products or international brands (cosmetics, medicines, drinks). The frequent complaints were regarding quality of fruits and fresh vegetables. Some complaints regarding lack of vegetarian and organic food can be considered as a relatively new but rising trend in the travelers' desires. 68,8% of participants said there weren't any unpleasant situations in Kazakhstan. Some incidents were commented as "normal criminality of metropolitan city". What could be better organized and improved? Predominantly: transport and the level of services. The environmental issues, what is a leading topic for tourism nowadays, must be taken seriously into consideration for the development of tourism industry in Kazakhstan.

90% of the interviewees expressed the wish to visit Kazakhstan again, and 80% will recommend it to the friends and colleagues. The cities of Astana and Almaty were the top attractions, and different forms of business events are considered to be the strongest magnet for visitors. Among alternative forms of tourism to be developed in Kazakhstan, the incentive travel and eco-tourism could be considered.

In conclusion, it is necessary to acknowledge that Kazakhstan joined the group of states that have successfully organized mega events, including, but not limited to EXPO ASTANA 2017, but also Universiada Almaty 2017, and Asiada 2011. Recent accomplishments have proven to be tools for building a positive image of the country and for strengthening national identity and patriotic attitudes. At this stage it is necessary to show tangible results, to get return on investment, and to present reliable figures on expenditure and income. The task requires cost transparency and better access to data. Narxoz University is recently launching a new specialization in Event Management to prepare future staff for the Meeting & Event Industry emerging in this region.¹⁴

¹⁴ Analysis of preparations for mega events is a subject of article "Mega events in Kazakhstan in search of the balance between promotion and business". Wroblewski S., Abdirazakov N., Sagyndykov S. (2017).

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