

<http://eng.nisi.kg/111-novosti-nisi-na-glavnuyu/430-why-tourism-should-be-the-leading-sector-of-economic-development-for-kyrgyzstan.html>

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Given the great potentials of tourism in Kyrgyzstan, everyone will agree that tourism is an important sector for the future development of Kyrgyzstan. However, I would like to go one step further and point out that tourism should be given priority over other sectors considering its huge impact, cost effectiveness and various other positive externalities.

In terms of its impact, I believe that the contribution of tourism sector in GDP which currently stands at 4.5% with around 1 million inbound foreign tourist should be brought up to at least 10%. And I believe that it could be done with a little bit of extra effort. If countries like Georgia, Armenia can achieve more than twice the share of tourism in GDP than Kyrgyzstan, Kyrgyzstan should be able to do the same if not better. Reaching this level would result in additional US\$ 400 mil. inflow to the tourism sector annually. Noting that tourism spending brings about additional spending in other sectors including IT, transportation and construction sectors, the so call tourism multiplier, as much US\$ 1 bil. may end up flowing into the economy as a whole. Tourism development will also contribute to improving the chronic current account deficit problem. Moreover benefits of tourism are distributed widely amongst various economic agents including individuals and small enterprises, contributing to income distribution and rural development.

There are also very important non-economical positive externalities from tourism in the way of helping to build national identity, promoting democracy and even raising self esteem of people. It also goes without saying that it would be an effective means to preserve and enhance wonderful natural and cultural heritage of Kyrgyzstan.

Given all the positivities of tourism, naturally ensuing question is how competitive is Kyrgyzstan's tourism? My answer is simply that although not realized yet its potentials are one of the global. Kyrgyzstan can become Switzerland of Asia - not just rhetorics. Much of the inadequacies in the Kyrgyz tourism sector today is due to the lack of this realization. That is Kyrgyz people in general including those working in tourism area seem to know that the country is somewhat attractive but do not realize to what extent and thus far less emphasis is given than it deserves.

Firstly Kyrgyzstan has exceptional and unique tourism endowments, both natural and cultural. Kyrgyzstan is blessed with majestic and beautiful nature which ironically due to underdevelopment has largely remained pristine and untouched. The country has as its backbone two iconic mountain chains, Tian Shan and Pamir which for many people in Asia are not just an object of climbing and appreciation but of reverence since the ancient times. For many Chinese, Japanese and Koreans (I am a Korean), visiting the Tian Shan or the Heavenly Mountain is like a pilgrimage to be undertaken in one's lifetime. Moreover the countless number of serene and magical lakes offer picture-perfect harmony with the mountains. Where in the world other than in Kyrgyzstan would you see people swimming in the lake in the middle of summer with glacier topped mountains enveloping like a silk screen?

But as we are all aware, beauty of the land without a story to tell is like a pretty maiden without a soul. In the case of Kyrgyzstan, on top of the physical beauty there are myriad of interesting stories to tell. History of the land goes way back to the days of King Solomon and as saying goes he is believed to have been buried somewhere near Osh. How he ended up in Kyrgyzstan no one seems to know! King Alexander having reached Kyrgyzstan during his Asian incursion brought the walnuts of Arslanbob back to Greece and named them as Greek nuts. How clever! Kyrgyzstan is located at the heart of Silk Road, the land where great nomads roamed from Huns to Mongols on their horsebacks. It was at the Battle of Talas in the year 751 that further intrusion of Tang Dynasty westward was halted. Paper is reputed to have been introduced to the west as one of the unintended byproduct of the fighting. For Koreans, Talas battle is famous because the general who led the Tang army was a Korean refugee living in China.

In terms of its people, Kyrgyzstan is ethnically one of the most diverse country in the world. Besides the Kyrgyz, 80 different ethnic groups from Europe, Near East, Central Asia and the Far East are represented in modern day Kyrgyzstan living in harmony. Nomadic life of Kyrgyz nomads is not just a show for tourist but an actual livelihood, one of the last bastion of nomadic living. Even the horses of Kyrgyzstan are renown for their strength and speed, greatly sought after from ancient time often at the expense of waging wars to acquire them. Did you know that there are ten different Chinese names for the great horses of Fergana valley?

Another salient aspect of Kyrgyzstan tourism is that it is the epitome of the sustainable tourism that is preferred by everyone these days. Sustainable tourism is the notion of tourism that seeks to preserve nature rather than depleting it and enrich the cultural heritage of the land. What a bonanza for Kyrgyzstan tourism, this adds even more strength to already strong potentials.

To complete the argument for the need to greatly uplift the tourism sector one has to look at the cost side as well. No matter how large the benefit, if the costs are equally high then the net benefit is nil. Fortunately In the case of tourism development it is the opposite. The cost side is quite manageable relatively speaking not requiring much resources whereas its benefits are large as tourism rather than being capital intensive is more nature and culture intensive-two ingredients to successful tourism recipe that Kyrgyzstan is lucky to have in abundance. Of course this is not to de-emphasize tourism infrastructures such as paved roads and nice hotels but in this age of new tourism, people are just as or even more keen trekking the winding dirt road and sleeping in a Yurt on a starry night.

Thus conclusion is quite straightforward then, tourism is powerful and economical way to develop Kyrgyzstan and nothing is in the way so as saying goes "just do it."