**EXPO and Tourism in Kazakhstan**

***How has hosting the EXPO specialized world exhibition in Astana affected the tourist industry, and what can Kazakhstan already take pride in? We have found answers to these questions in some interesting statistics.***

The bigger the scale of an event, the greater the number of people wishing to see it. Almost four million people attended the EXPO specialized world exhibition. That is twice as many as the organizers had planned.

"On the penultimate day of the show, September 9, **100,514 people attended** the EXPO 2017 specialized exhibition. By way of comparison, during the early days of the Exhibition, an average of 22,840 visits were recorded. Between June 10 and September 9, the EXPO 2017 specialized international exhibition had over 3,860,000 visitors", according to the EXPO press office.

Tour operators could not fail to be delighted at the way things went. The growth in the tourist flow to EXPO worked out very well for them, and indeed 30 or so players in the tourism market went so far as to write an open letter to the organizing committee of the exhibition, asking for it to be extended to November. "The country's tour operators have been able to test out their routes in practice; they have received feedback from real tourists and are improving their product. At the same time, companies have hired between 10 and 200 people", said the tour companies. Their request was declined, though, so as not to break International Exhibitions Bureau rules.

According to the EXPO press office, demand for the tour operators' services from customers from the CIS countries and beyond grew by 78%. About thirty thousand people took advantage of the Astana City Pass tourist card. Over five thousand people made use of double-decker tour buses. Audio-guides were used by twelve thousand people from thirteen countries (Australia, Malaysia, Singapore, Slovakia, Russia, Azerbaijan, Turkey, Germany, China, Spain, Poland, France and Serbia).

The statistics show that most people came to EXPO by road, followed by railroad and air transport. Astana Convention Bureau CEO Saniyar Aytekenov cites some interesting data: the tour operators have observed a 78% growth in interest in their services compared with the same period last year. Astana's hotels have been at 60% occupancy, although just last year they were at only 28% of guest capacity. Tourist Information kiosks have served over 5,000 tourists, while the use of audio-guides and coach excursions has doubled. Astana's railroad station and airport were operating at roughly 60-70% of capacity. In the first two months alone, 15,416 guests were accommodated at the EXPO village, with about five thousand people staying there permanently.

According to the Civil Aviation Committee, air passenger volume grew by 88% on internal routes, and by 30% on external routes, while EXPO was taking place. During EXPO, Astana Airport served 1.5 million people, 830 thousand of them arriving and departing on internal flights, and over 600 thousand on external ones. The official carrier of EXPO, Air Astana, has announced that the routes with the highest weekend and holiday traffic volume of the entire exhibition period were Astana-Almaty (up to 90%), Astana-Atyrau (up to 86%) and Astana-Shmykent (up to 80%). As for international flights, passenger volume increased on the Astana-Kiev (28% growth), Astana-Moscow (28%), Astana-Istanbul (23%) and Astana-Paris (21%) routes. Compared with the same period last year, passenger volume to Astana was up by 88% as a direct result of the hosting of EXPO.

Inspired by the "EXPO effect", the Astana authorities have given serious thought to ways of consolidating the achievements of the exhibition in the field of tourism. According to Alisher Abdykadyrov, head of Astana's Department of Investments and Development, over a million and a half foreign guests came to the capital while the exhibition was on, while the regional administration or *Akimat* of Astana has set itself the target of attracting a million tourists by 2020 without a tie-in to events.

"We have studied the experience of EXPO in various countries. One of the challenges for the host country, and especially for the host city, is maintaining the visitor figures after the exhibition has taken place. Of course, we can't repeat this sort of thing every year. Overall, though, we see tourism as a new economic growth point. The Persian Gulf countries, which derive a significant portion of their GDP from tourism, are an example. So, we have prepared our own development strategy for this sector. The main target figure is one million foreign tourists by 2020. We also want to increase their length of stay", said Alisher Abdykadyrov.

It is already clear that the number of small and medium-sized enterprises in the country has increased, and unemployment has fallen. According to Akhmetzhan Yessimov, the visitor numbers planned beforehand were achieved a full 37 days before the exhibition ended.

In 2017, 201 hotels were built in the capital, increasing the number of hotels by one-third compared with 2016. Room occupancy trebled. The number of hostels grew from 36 to 95. EXPO 2017 also caused a spike in food consumption. According to the Ministry of Agriculture, since March of this year 25 thousand tonnes of produce has been sold for a total of 8 million tenge at the markets held as part of the Regional Days at EXPO. Of that total, fruit and vegetables accounted for 13 thousand tonnes, and meat of all kinds for 3.2 thousand tonnes.

As for the exhibition itself, there were more than 17 million visits to the country pavilions in the first two months alone. At that point, one of the most popular pavilions was the Africa Plaza, with 659 thousand visits, followed by Egypt (608 thousand) and Turkey (596 thousand).

The Kazakhstan national pavilion, the famous sphere, was the most-visited facility at EXPO. Between 10 and 28 thousand people visited it each day, and it had the most high-ranking guests, the leaders of over 50 countries of the world. The actual sphere, 80 meters in diameter and over 100 meters tall, has been named as the largest spherical building in the world. According to its designers, it is the first fully spherical building in the world. Solar batteries were installed on its facade, and wind generators on the upper part of it, so that the sphere uses the very "future energy" that the exhibition was all about. After the exhibition, the building will become a tourist attraction: it will be home to the "Museum of the Future".

It is hard to say whether the growth in tourist activity would have occurred had the exhibition not taken place in Astana. It is generally the case around the world that "Event tourism" does lead to growth in all sectors, and experts say that it is precisely the mixed type of event, accessible both to sector professionals and to general visitors, that is most attractive from the point of view of tourism growth.

EXPO is not seen as comparable with such mega-events as the Olympic Games or the soccer World Cup, but the fact remains that visitor figures for the Astana exhibition turned out to be respectably high. Never mind that Astana achieved the two million visitor mark two months after it started, whereas the Olympic capital chalks up about a million home and foreign guests in two weeks. By way of comparison, the most recent soccer World Cup, which went on for a month, attracted about 4.8 million fanzone visits.

The line between special and ordinary tourism is gradually getting finer. The procession of soccer matches, concerts, internal arrangements and routine events certainly encourages people to travel around within the country and outside it, but more and more people travel at weekends and public holidays for "no special reason", just for a change of scene, if there is something to see in the city they are going to.

The attractions built in Astana for EXPO, and the large-scale promotion of Kazakhstan and Astana that was carried out around the world in connection with EXPO, are sure to reflect positively on the country’s image and make tourists more interested in visiting the heart of Central Asia. How tour operators will manage to take advantage of this opportunity after the exhibition ends, only time will tell.