

## Trends in the Development of Ecotourism in the Southern Region of Kyrgyzstan

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**Abstract:** The research aims to reveal one of the promising sectors of the economy, which positively affects the growth and development of the regional economy. As a labor-intensive sector, tourism has significant potential to generate income and create jobs from virtually untapped resources and can contribute to poverty alleviation. The authors use benchmarking methods to determine the actual use of potential resources in the tourism industry. The research objects are tourist destinations in the southern region of Kyrgyzstan. In today's world, ecotourism is successfully developing and goes along with the environmental education of tourists. The naturalness and beauty of nature have always attracted urban residents who yearn for peace and tranquility. Kyrgyzstan's rich history and cultural heritage, reflected in its folk traditions and customs, are also of interest to the knowledge of enthusiastic tourists. While improving the infrastructure of tourist destinations and providing comfortable and pleasant conditions for visitors, the active use of these resources will solve

many socio-economic issues and improve the standard of living of the population. Based on the analysis of the research objects, it is substantiated that, knowing nature and taking care of the environment, tourists are imbued with a careful attitude towards it. The advantage is that the objectives of the tourism business are to generate profits and the financial well-being of the local population and preserve the country's natural and historical patrimony. To develop and support this industry, various fairs, exhibitions, and festivals are held in the regions, which are supported by the local population and tour operators. The development of tourism is relevant. In other words, the level of economic growth and the prospect of gaining benefits from the increase in ecotourism entrepreneurs in rural areas will stop internal migration to cities, and, along with youth employment, the population's standard of living and regional well-being will improve.

**Keywords:** regional economy, sustainable tourism, ecotourism, needs, welfare

**JEL codes:** R1, R2, R3, R5, R23, J43, J44, J45, O15

Tourism is rapidly developing. It occupies a special place in society, representing an independent complex of the economy, consisting of several industries and enterprises, the task of which is to satisfy the diverse demand of tourists for various services. During the holidays, tourists can learn about the culture of other countries, see interesting things, enrich themselves spiritually, improve their health physically, and escape from the hustle and bustle.

Tourism and travel are two related business areas. As a socio-economic phenomenon, tourism has various areas of economic relations to improve the population's well-being. One of the important functions of tourism is to provide employment in the tourism industry. Serving tourists is a source of income for the local population. In other words, the tourism industry and its development successfully contribute to the flow of finance into the country (Berezovaya, 2019).

Kyrgyzstan is famous for its magnificent mountain landscapes, spacious valleys, mountain lakes, walnut groves, nature reserves, and waterfalls. The diversity of the geographical structure and natural wealth, clean ecology, and fertile valleys of Kyrgyzstan is a huge potential for developing all types of tourism activities. This wealth is complemented by the historical heritage and culture of the Kyrgyz people, as well as their hospitality and sincere simplicity.

By many definitions, ecotourism is a form of sustainable tourism. From a practical point of view, ecotourism aims to use the local resource potential, acting as a responsible protector of nature and improving the well-being of the local population (Semenova & Maslova, 2016).

According to the World Tourism Organization, the main goals of ecotourism are as follows:

- Preservation of nature and socio-cultural environment;
- Responsibility for the development of the tourism business;
- Cooperation between local authorities and people;
- Support for assessment programs and long-term monitoring of the socio-cultural and natural environment;

- Development of tourism for the benefit of raising the standard of living of the local population;
- Protection of wildlife and native vegetation;
- Harmony with the environment.

The effective development of ecotourism requires the improvement of the infrastructure of the regions, making efforts to educate the local population about tourism. In terms of entrepreneurship, the main focus is on supporting women entrepreneurs in the region. An important step in transforming tourism is the development of local production and handicrafts and the holding of cultural events and various recreation and entertainment organizations. Simultaneously, the fame of a country and a region can only be revealed through competent media and advertising channels (Sayakbaeva & Dzhenalieva, 2016; Sayakbaeva et al., 2018).

### Method

The analysis of the tourism industry in the Kyrgyz Republic is based on statistical data prepared by the National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, which uses a certain methodology. Based on the presented time series, it allows the authors to conduct a comparative analysis over time and regions of the country. More than 120000 business entities are registered in Kyrgyzstan, representing tourism goods and services. Services are provided by enterprises in the form of excursions, accommodation, recreation, and entertainment. There is an increase in the production of food products, national drinks, and folk industrial crafts associated with tourism. Consumer interest in art and objects created using handicraft practices is predominantly growing. Accordingly, the number of tourists is also growing. The authors apply comparative analysis to determine the dynamics of changes in the ratio of investments in the tourism sector for 2016–2022 and economic growth rates (according to gross value added and GDP) (National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2022).

Tourism development indicators for 2016–2022 are presented in Figure 1.

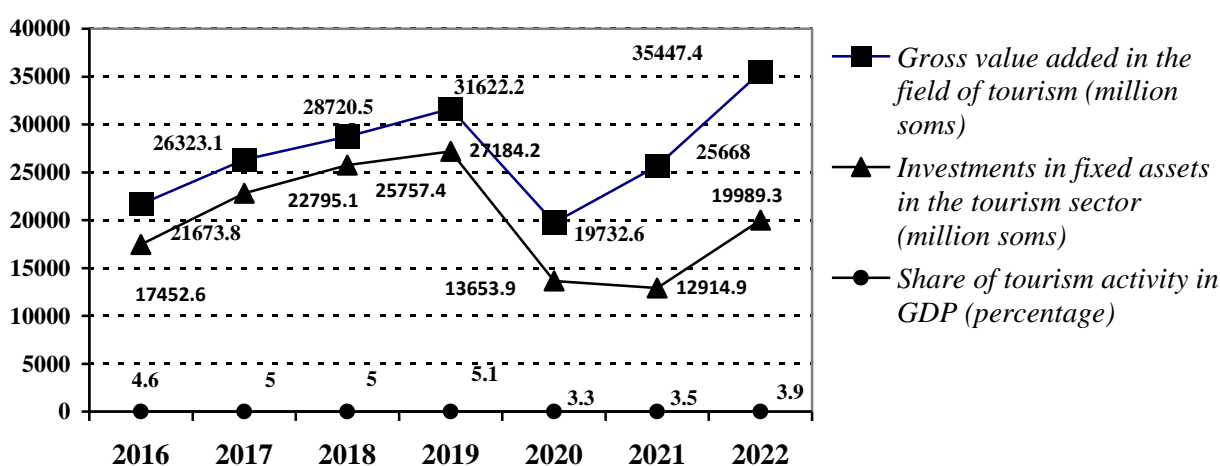


Figure 1

Tourism development indicators for 2016–2022

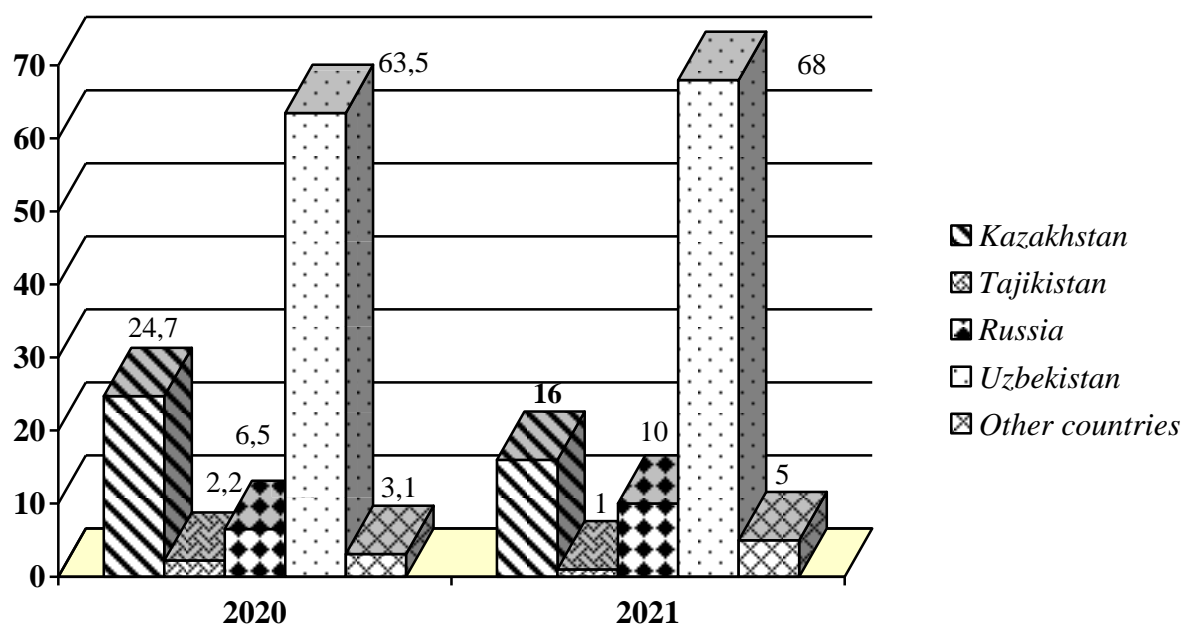
Source: Compiled by the authors based on data from the National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic (2022)

Figure 1 shows that the tourism industry has significantly contributed to the country's economy; there is an increase in investment in fixed capital of tourist facilities. In 2022, 19989.3 million soms were spent on constructing new tourism industry facilities, which is 1.4 times more compared to 2021. In the field of tourism, gross value added amounted to 35447.4 million soms, which is 36% more than in 2021 (the share of GDP was 3.9%, while in 2016, it was 4.6%). The dynamics show that the data has not yet recovered to the indicators of 2019 (before the COVID-19 pandemic) but already significantly exceeds the level of 2021 (National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2023).

## Results

According to the data provided by the State Border Service of the Kyrgyz Republic in 2021, the number of crossings of the border of the Kyrgyz Republic by foreign citizens (by country of citizenship) amounted to more than 3 million, which is 1 million more compared to 2020. The main number of crossings (arrivals) fell on citizens of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Russia, and Tajikistan (Lukyanets & Tyshevich, 2022).

The number of border crossings of the Kyrgyz Republic by foreign citizens (by country of citizenship (arrival)) in 2020–2021 is shown in Figure 2.



**Figure 2**

Number of border crossings of the Kyrgyz Republic by foreign citizens by country of citizenship (arrival) in 2020–2021

Source: Compiled by the authors based on data from the National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic (2022)

The development of domestic tourism and the tourism industry in the regions contributes to economic growth and the provision of material support to the region. It will significantly increase the country's profits and make a tangible contribution to the regional

economy. With various tourist destinations, the flow of local tourists to these places will increase. Further, the developed infrastructure of domestic tourism will attract international tourists from near and far abroad, gradually increasing the territory and scale of recreational zones (Bogolyubov & Orlovskaya, 2018).

### Discussion

Each region of Kyrgyzstan is distinguished by its diverse and attractive potential for developing various types of tourism. The picturesque beauty of Kyrgyz nature is combined with various features of tourist recreation such as hunting, horseback riding, nature observation, mountain lakes, and fishing. The most important settlements in the south of Kyrgyzstan are Osh, Jalal-Abad, Uzgen, Batken, Aksy, Toktogul, Ala-Buka, and Tash-Komur. Table 1 shows and highlights the most popular destinations in the southern region of the Kyrgyz Republic.

**Table 1**

Destinations in the southern region of Kyrgyzstan

No.	Region	Destination
1.	Jalal-Abad Region	Sary-Chelek, Arslanbob, Toktogul Reservoir, Padysh-Ata nature reserve, Chychkan Gorge, and resorts
2.	Osh Region	Sulaiman-Too, Kulun Lake, Tulpar Kul Lake, Chyyrchyk Pass, Taldyk Pass, Alai Valley, Kyrgyz-Ata Reserve, Abshyr-Ata Gorge, Lenin Peak, and healing springs
3.	Batken Region	Ai-Kul Lake, Aigul-Tash Mountain, Karavshan Gorge, Kan-i-Gut Cave, and Kan Fortress

*Source:* Developed by the authors

The ancient city of Osh is one of the important centers from a historical point of view. For more than 3000 years, the city's history, culture, and flavor have evolved. The southern capital is famous for its delicious culinary dishes: samsa, pilaf, and lagman. One of the Osh chips – raykhon chalap – is a fermented milk drink to which various vegetables and fruits are added and mixed with a special broom made from raykhon (basil), which gives the drink a special flavor. In Osh, one can also taste a lot of delicious, healthy, and rare fruits that grow seasonally only in the south of the country.

There are also interesting places for tourists to visit, like the local market. In the market, one can see the works of artisans and craftsmen who inherit the professions of their fathers and grandfathers, which is very typical of the Eastern mentality of the country, where it is important to honor family traditions. They make gold jewelry, gift knives, and various household utensils. The locals are proud of their traditions and crafts, including carpet weaving, silk making, and felt making. Tourists can visit workshops and museums to learn more about local crafts and purchase unique items. On the market, one can find outfits and fabrics in ethnic styles.

The country's southern capital is represented by the entire UNESCO World Heritage Site Sulaiman-Too, which has long become the city's symbol, like the Eiffel Tower for France. Due to their high location and natural beauty, these places have become the most frequently visited in recent years. On the central square of Osh, there is a monument to the leader of the world proletariat Vladimir Lenin. Near the Kyrgyz National Drama Theater, there is a new monumental composition dedicated to the Great Silk Road, which consists of a caravan leader, 19 camels, horses, and taigans.

Jalal-Abad is the third largest city in Kyrgyzstan, one of the oldest settlements on the Silk Road. It is located in the southwest of the Kyrgyz Republic. It borders Uzbekistan. Moreover, it borders the Talas Region on the north, the Naryn Region on the east, and the Osh Region on the southeast. The region's total area is 33.7 thousand square km, which is about 17% of the total territory of the Kyrgyz Republic. This region can be considered one of the leading in agriculture. Near Bazar-Korgon is the mountain village of Arslanbob, which is famous as the largest walnut forest and has the status of a national park. Arslanbob is also famous for pilgrimages and hiking trails. This place, with its clean air and wonderful mountain nature, is considered unique and, in terms of ecotourism, is a candidate for the most important recreation centers.

Sary-Chelek is the third deepest lake in Central Asia and the second deepest in Kyrgyzstan. It is a unique place that attracts attention with its natural beauty. When fall comes, and the foliage of the trees turns yellow, the lake begins to resemble a bucket of honey.

The reserve and adjacent territories include river valleys that flow in places between steep banks, forming the strongest waterfalls. From the western borders of the reserve, the sources of the turbulent Khodzha-Ata River begin, which flows quickly throughout almost its entire territory, forming picturesque waterfalls.

The most favorable time for traveling to these places is from June to September. Lake Sary-Chelek and the mountains adjacent to it have been and remain the most visited territory. The clear water of the mountain lake is a preferred place for local tourists and, even more so, for tourists from near and far abroad (Jenish, 2017).

Mountain tourism (i.e., jailoo) bears the authenticity of traces of family culture. Hospitable people will welcome tourists in traditional Kyrgyz yurts with national dishes and traditional drinks (e.g., zharma and koumiss). Based on Kyrgyz traditions, interesting entertainment, and activities will be offered. Hunting with a golden eagle and horseback riding through the spacious pastures of Kyrgyzstan will be interesting entertainment for guests. Horseback riding in Kyrgyzstan, purely from a traditional point of view, can become an epicenter for attracting tourists. This experience will be fruitful in developing ecotourism and will be an impetus for developing entrepreneurship in tourism.

Aigul, a flower of unusual beauty, which is a symbol of Batken, grows in the most remote corner of Kyrgyzstan, in the vicinity of Batken. Orange flowers attract a considerable stream of locals and tourists during their bloom. Flowering time falls on the month of April.

To preserve the environment, local residents should be very attentive to the protection of these endemic plants because it belongs to endangered species and is listed in the Red Book.

Toktogul is home to the largest hydroelectric power plants, which meet 70% of the country's energy needs. The region has a considerable number of mines and hydroelectric power plants. Toktogul and its environs are famous for horseback riding and fishing on the Naryn River. It is a perfect place for fishing. The river's flow and its speed attract the attention of many foreign tourists interested in rafting. With the right investment in the entrepreneurship of the tourism industry, it is the rafting destination that can achieve great success and become one of the most important rafting centers in the world (Jenish, 2017).

## **Conclusion**

The development of domestic tourism is especially important for Kyrgyzstan. In addition to the COVID-19 pandemic, the economic crisis, currency fluctuations in the market, and the low incomes of the population are arguments for developing tourism in Kyrgyzstan. Budget tours have been and continue to be the most popular for the local population, such as equestrian tourism, summer tourism, camping, beach tourism, and koumiss treatment (health tourism). Ski resorts are active in winter. The advantages of tourism in Kyrgyzstan are as follows:

- Affordability (there is no need to buy international tickets and apply for visas);
- No language barrier;
- Safety of rest (a tourist is more protected within his own country);
- Mobility of the trip – any convenient time for rest.

This direction can be implemented with the right marketing approach in studying tourism products for a potential segment of its implementation. An information campaign for the offer of tourist products should be well developed; a high-quality implementation of hospitality for tourists throughout the recreation and entertainment area should be implemented (Government of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2019).

In this research, it is impossible to bypass the COVID-19 pandemic. The tourism industry, like many other sectors of the economy, was not ready for such tests. The global pandemic has reduced the ability to travel. According to the estimates of the National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, for the pandemic period, the export of tourism services in the country decreased by 81% in 2020 compared to 2019. The data shows that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a negative impact on the international tourism market, causing the tourism market to pay attention to the domestic tourism market. In this regard, the impact of the pandemic on the domestic tourism market in Kyrgyzstan is significant (National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2022).

Thus, we can conclude that the COVID-19 crisis has posed the main question for the world to rethink the model of their lives and actions. After the COVID-19 pandemic, people began to value health and care about it. This gives a certain impetus to the growth and development of the tourism sector. With the correct formation of a high-quality domestic

tourism product based on existing tourism resources, the necessary policy is implemented to develop tourism in the regions. Economic turbulence in the development of this area may change due to the domestic political situation in the country. Therefore, we are obliged to maintain peace and tranquility, appreciate and love the world around us, and, most importantly, treat each other with kindness. Ordinary citizens of the country have a special role to play in developing tourism (Umuralieva, 2021).

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