

Tourism in Mongolia. An Analysis of the Historical Context and Contemporary Challenges.

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Abstract

International tourism in Mongolia is in modern terms still in its infancy. The first international visitors arrived in 1994, when visas were finally available to international tourists. For all its socialist period, from 1924 until 1992, Mongolia was closed to the outside world. Today Mongolia is, measured by Gross Domestic Product, one of the poorest nations on earth. The primary foreign exchange earner of Mongolia is the export of minerals. Tourism is increasingly important to the national economy, providing not only hard currency earnings but also desperately needed employment. Stated government policy is the future development of tourism, especially the increase in foreign visitors and the contribution tourism makes to the national economy.

This thesis begins with a review of the historical context of tourism in Mongolia. It then proceeds to address two main research objectives: To provide detailed and current visitor profiles of Mongolia's major tourism market regions and to define and discuss the main contemporary challenges tourism in Mongolia is facing today. The results of this thesis are the outcome of a visitor survey conducted by the author in Mongolia. During 63 days, over 4100 usable eight page questionnaires were collected. The survey was conducted in the departure lounge of Buyant Ukha International Airport, the main international gateway to Mongolia.

The analysed data generated by the visitor survey provides the core results of this study. This includes details of visitor demographics, visitor travel patterns, perceptions of services and facilities and visitor expenditure. The results are categorized by Mongolia's main market areas as well as purpose of visit. Key results include that the majority of Mongolia's leisure visitors originate from seven key international markets: France, USA, UK, Japan, Germany, Italy, and Korea. Mongolia's key drawing factors are "Natural Scenery" and "Mongolian Traditional Culture". "Travel Guidebooks" and the "Internet" are the most important sources of information. Visitors stay on average 14.8 nights and the most popular destinations within Mongolia are "The Gobi" and "Terelj". Drawing on this analysis, this thesis identifies four key contemporary challenges for tourism in Mongolia: A lack of comprehensive and reliable tourism data, a rise in crime levels, an extreme pattern of tourism seasonality and an underdeveloped domestic transport network.

If tourism in Mongolia is to increase its contribution to the national economy and continue developing, this thesis recommends that the collection of detailed visitor data should become a main objective for all stakeholders. The collection of detailed tourism data is an essential starting point to better overcome the other three pressing challenges facing tourism in Mongolia today. This thesis further recommends to make the extension of the short summer tourist season a strategic objective, to implement crime reduction measures such as the establishment of a tourism police unit and to overhaul the domestic air transport sector.