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HISTORICAL FORMATION AND DEVELOPMENT TRENDS OF TOURISM IN THE ALAKOL AND ISSYK-KUL REGIONS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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Abstract. Introduction. The regions of Alakol and Issyk-Kul are among the largest natural and tourist areas in Central Asia. Both lakes share geographical, ecological, and cultural similarities, providing a basis for a comparative analysis of the historical formation and current development trends of regional tourism. Lake Alakol is located in eastern Kazakhstan, while Lake Issyk-Kul lies in northern Kyrgyzstan. Since ancient times, both water bodies have served as important centers of trade and cultural exchange. During the Soviet period, these regions were developed as therapeutic and recreational zones, forming the foundation of their tourism infrastructure. After gaining independence, the role of tourism acquired new economic and social importance. In the 21st century, the Alakol and Issyk-Kul regions have become among the main destinations for both national and international tourists. In recent decades, infrastructure modernization, the development of resort areas, and the improvement of road and transport accessibility have been actively implemented. **Purpose and objectives.** The aim of this study is to conduct a comparative analysis of the historical formation and development trends of tourism in the Alakol and Issyk-Kul regions, identifying their similarities and differences. To achieve this goal, the study focuses on systematizing the historical stages of tourism development in both regions, examining the characteristics of tourism during the Soviet and post-Soviet periods, and determining the cultural and social significance of regional tourism through comparative analysis. **Materials and methods.** The study is based on official statistical data, state programs, and scientific publications related to the historical development and current state of tourism in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. National tourism strategies and regional development plans of both countries were also analyzed. The research employs historical-comparative, systemic, and structural analysis, as well as comparative

interpretation of factual materials. *Results.* The research results show that although the dynamics of tourism development in the Alakol and Issyk-Kul regions followed similar trajectories, certain differences are observed due to the economic and ecological policies of each country. In Kazakhstan, emphasis is placed on modernizing tourism infrastructure and developing ecological tourism, while in Kyrgyzstan, tourism is primarily focused on natural and mountain recreation. *Conclusion.* The comparative analysis of the historical formation and current development trends of tourism in the Alakol and Issyk-Kul regions reveals both common directions and distinctive national features in the tourism sectors of the two countries. Historically, both regions emerged as areas with high natural-recreational potential and became key centers of organized recreation during the Soviet period. However, to ensure sustainable tourism development, it is essential to use natural resources efficiently, modernize infrastructure, and strengthen cross-border cooperation.

Keywords: Alakol, Issyk-Kul, historical continuity, regional tourism, cultural strategy, natural recreational potential.

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АЛАКӨЛ МЕН ЫСТЫҚКӨЛ Өңірлеріндегі туризмнің тарихи қалыптасуы мен даму тенденциялары: салыстырмалы талдау

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Аңдатпа. *Kіріспе.* Алакөл мен Ыстықкөл өңірлері Орталық Азия кеңістігіндегі ең ірі табиғи-туристік аймақтардың қатарына жатады. Бұл екі көл де географиялық, экологиялық және мәдени тұрғыдан бір-біріне ұқсас сипаттарға ие болып, аймақтық туризмнің тарихи қалыптасуы мен қазіргі даму үрдістерін салыстырмалы талдауға мүмкіндік береді. Алакөл көлі Қазақстанның шығысында, ал Ыстықкөл көлі Қырғызстанның солтүстігінде орналасқан. Екі су айдыны да ежелгі дәуірлерден бері сауда және мәдени байланыстардың маңызды орталығы болған. Кеңестік кезеңде бұл өңірлер емдік-сауықтыру және рекреациялық аймақтар ретінде қалыптасып, туризм инфрақұрылымының негізі қаланды. Тәуелсіздік алғаннан кейін туризмнің рөлі жаңа экономикалық және әлеуметтік маңызға ие болды. ХХІ ғасырда Алакөл мен Ыстықкөл аймақтары ұлттық және халықаралық деңгейде туристердің басты бағыттарының біріне айналды. Соңғы онжылдықтарда бұл өңірлерде инфрақұрылымдық жаңғыру, курорттық аймақтарды дамыту, жол және көлік қолжетімділігін арттыру сияқты шаралар жүргізіліп келеді. *Мақсаты мен міндеттері.* Алакөл мен Ыстықкөл өңірлеріндегі туризмнің тарихи қалыптасуы мен даму тенденцияларына салыстырмалы талдау жүргізу арқылы олардың ерекшеліктері мен ұсаықтарын анықтау. Осы мақсатқа жету үшін зерттеу барысында екі аймақтағы туризмнің тарихи кезеңдерін жүйелеуге, кеңестік және посткеңестік кезеңдердегі даму ерекшеліктерін зерделеуге, салыстырмалы талдау негізінде туризмнің аймақтық мәдени және әлеуметтік маңызын көрсете отырып, ортақ және айырым белгілерін айқындауды міндеттері ретінде айқындадық. *Материалдар мен әдістер.* Қазақстан мен Қырғызстандағы

туризмнің тарихи дамуы мен қазіргі ахуалына қатысты ресми статистикалық деректер, мемлекеттік бағдарламалар, ғылыми мақалалар осы мақаланың материалдық базасын құрайды. Сондай-ақ екі елдің ұлттық туризм стратегиялары мен өңірлік даму жоспарлары, мемлекеттік бағдарламалары қарастырылды. Зерттеуде тарихи-салыстырмалы, жүйелі және құрылымдық талдау, деректік материалдарды салыстырмалы интерпретациялау әдістері қолданылды. *Нәтижелер.* Зерттеу нәтижелері көрсеткендей, Алакөл мен Ыстықкөл өңірлеріндегі туризмнің даму динамикасы ұқсас бағытта өрбігенімен, әр елдің экономикалық және экологиялық саясатына байланысты ерекшеліктер байқалады. Қазақстанда туризм инфрақұрылымын жаңғырту мен экологиялық туризмді дамытуға басымдық берілсе, Қырғызстанда табиғи-рекреациялық әлеует пен тау туризміне негізделген бағыттар белсенді дамуда. *Қорытынды.* Алакөл мен Ыстықкөл өңірлеріндегі туризмнің тарихи қалыптасуы мен қазіргі даму тенденцияларын салыстыра талдау нәтижесінде екі елдің туризм саласында ортақ бағыттармен қатар, өзіндік ұлттық ерекшеліктері бар екені анықталды. Тарихи тұрғыдан алғанда, екі өңір де табиғи-рекреациялық әлеуеті жоғары аймақтар ретінде қалыптасып, кенестік кезеңде ұйымдасқан демалыс жүйесінің маңызды орталықтарына айналды. Дегенмен, туризмнің тұрақты дамуын қамтамасыз ету үшін табиғи ресурстарды тиімді пайдалану, инфрақұрылымды жаңғырту және трансшекаралық ынтымақтастықты күшейту маңызды.

Кілт сөздер: Алакөл, Ыстықкөл, тарихи сабақтастық, өңірлік туризм, мәдени стратегия, табиғи-рекреациялық әлеует.

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ИСТОРИЧЕСКОЕ СТАНОВЛЕНИЕ И ТЕНДЕНЦИИ РАЗВИТИЯ ТУРИЗМА В РЕГИОНАХ АЛАКОЛЬ И ИССЫК-КУЛЬ: СРАВНИТЕЛЬНЫЙ АНАЛИЗ

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Аннотация. *Введение.* Регионы Алаколь и Иссык-Куль относятся к числу крупнейших природно-туристических зон Центральной Азии. Оба озера обладают схожими географическими, экологическими и культурными характеристиками, что позволяет провести сравнительный анализ исторического формирования и современных тенденций развития регионального туризма. Озеро Алаколь расположено на востоке Казахстана, а Иссык-Куль — на севере Кыргызстана. С древних времён оба водоёма служили важными центрами торговли и культурных связей. В советский период данные регионы развивались как лечебно-оздоровительные и рекреационные зоны, что заложило основу их туристической инфраструктуры. После обретения независимости туризм приобрёл новое экономическое и социальное значение. В XXI веке Алаколь и Иссык-Куль стали одними из главных направлений для национальных и международных туристов. В последние десятилетия активно реализуются проекты по модернизации инфраструктуры, развитию курортных зон и повышению

транспортной доступности. *Цель и задачи.* Цель исследования — провести сравнительный анализ исторического формирования и тенденций развития туризма в регионах Алаколь и Иссык-Куль, выявив их сходства и различия. Для достижения данной цели были определены следующие задачи: систематизация исторических этапов развития туризма в двух регионах, изучение особенностей советского и постсоветского периодов, а также определение культурного и социального значения регионального туризма на основе сравнительного анализа. *Материалы и методы.* В качестве материалов исследования использовались официальные статистические данные, государственные программы и научные публикации, посвящённые историческому развитию и современному состоянию туризма в Казахстане и Кыргызстане. Кроме того, были рассмотрены национальные стратегии развития туризма и региональные планы социально-экономического развития обеих стран. В исследовании применялись историко-сравнительный, системный и структурный анализ, сравнительная интерпретация фактических материалов. *Результаты.* Результаты исследования показали, что динамика развития туризма в регионах Алаколь и Иссык-Куль имеет схожие направления, однако наблюдаются различия, обусловленные экономической и экологической политикой каждой страны. В Казахстане приоритет отдается модернизации туристической инфраструктуры и развитию экологического туризма, тогда как в Кыргызстане акцент делается на природно-рекреационные ресурсы и горный туризм. *Заключение.* Сравнительный анализ исторического формирования и современных тенденций развития туризма в регионах Алаколь и Иссык-Куль выявил как общие направления, так и национальные особенности в туристической отрасли двух стран. Исторически оба региона сформировались как территории с высоким природно-рекреационным потенциалом и в советский период стали важными центрами организованного отдыха. Вместе с тем для обеспечения устойчивого развития туризма необходимо рациональное использование природных ресурсов, модернизация инфраструктуры и укрепление трансграничного сотрудничества.

Ключевые слова: Алаколь, Иссык-Куль, историческая преемственность, региональный туризм, культурная стратегия, природно-рекреационный потенциал.

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Introduction. Tourism has become one of the key directions of global economy, cultural integration, and civilizational communication in the 21st century for any country. Today, tourism functions not only as an economic sector but also as an instrument for preserving and promoting historical and cultural heritage, shaping regional identity, and strengthening the national image. In particular, lake regions with a high natural and recreational potential stand out as one of the significant directions in the history of tourism in Central Asia. Such lake regions are characterized by their outstanding natural conditions and favorable environment for health restoration, leisure, tourism development, and the enhancement of ecological values [Benkhard et al., 2025: 5]. From this perspective, the Alakol and Issyk-Kul regions, while sharing geographical, historical, and cultural similarities, also demonstrate distinctive features of their developmental trajectories.

Alakol, located in the eastern part of Kazakhstan, is known for its natural therapeutic properties and potential for ecological tourism. Issyk-Kul, in turn, is one of the largest alpine lakes in Kyrgyzstan and has long been regarded as a cultural, commercial, and spiritual center of the region throughout historical epochs. Both lakes are situated along the ancient Silk Road (Zhibek Zholy), and the settlements and routes surrounding them formed important channels of early cultural exchange. Over time, this space transformed into a zone of recreational, therapeutic, and cultural tourism development.

The study of the historical formation of tourism constitutes an important aspect in understanding the social structure of society, the transformation of economic activities, and the evolution of leisure culture. During the Soviet period, tourism developed within the framework of state ideology and the planned economy, which contributed to the establishment of a network of recreational zones. In the years of independence, tourism acquired new content, being restructured on the basis of market relations and international cooperation. These processes have also been reflected, in their own distinctive ways, in the development of the Alakol and Issyk-Kul regions.

The aim of this study is to identify the similarities and differences in the historical formation and development trends of tourism in the Alakol and Issyk-Kul regions through a comparative analysis. To achieve this goal, the following three objectives have been defined:

- to determine the specific features of development during the Soviet and post-Soviet periods;
- to reveal the regional cultural and social significance of tourism;
- to identify common and distinctive characteristics on the basis of comparative analysis.

The object of the study is the tourism system of the Alakol and Issyk-Kul regions and its historical evolution, with a particular focus on the historical, social, and cultural development trends of tourism. The scientific novelty of this article lies in the fact that, for the first time, the historical formation of tourism in the Alakol and Issyk-Kul regions is comprehensively examined from a historical-comparative perspective. Within this framework, the historical continuity and distinctive features of tourism policies in the two countries – Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan – have been identified.

The theoretical significance of the research lies in its contribution to regional historiography through the identification of historical patterns in the development of lake tourism in Central Asia. Its practical significance consists in the possibility of applying the historical experience to current regional tourism development strategies, the preservation of cultural heritage, and the formation of a tourist brand. Thus, the relevance of the topic is based on two factors: first, the study of the tourism history of the Alakol and Issyk-Kul regions provides insight into the socio-cultural interrelations among the countries of Central Asia; second, identifying historical continuity can serve as a scientific foundation for defining effective directions in contemporary tourism policy.

Materials and Methods. To conduct a comparative analysis of the historical formation and development trends of tourism in the Alakol and Issyk-Kul regions, a comprehensive set of sources and methodological approaches was employed. The research is based on a wide range of factual materials and scholarly literature, which made it possible to analyze in a complex manner the socio-economic, cultural, and political transformations that took place during different historical periods. The source base includes official documents and statistical reports from the Soviet period, academic works of domestic and foreign researchers, official information from local executive bodies available in open sources, as well as national and regional programs of the independence period and articles from mass media outlets.

The methodological foundation of the study is built upon the principles of historical-comparative and systemic analysis. The historical-comparative method was used to identify the stages of formation, development tendencies, and similarities and differences in the evolution of tourism in the Alakol and Issyk-Kul regions. This approach made it possible to trace the evolution of interregional relations while preserving the national specificities of historical processes.

The systemic analysis method was applied to examine the economic, cultural, and social components of tourism in their interrelation. Tourism was studied not only as a form of leisure or an economic phenomenon but also as a historical and cultural phenomenon. However, it is important to acknowledge certain research limitations encountered during the study. These include the insufficiency of complete statistical data for certain historical periods and the inaccessibility of some archival materials. Given that the Alakol and Issyk-Kul regions are geographically, culturally, and socially comparable, the analysis was carried out within the Soviet and post-Soviet contexts. Nevertheless, the available empirical materials and scholarly works provided a sufficiently solid foundation to identify the historical dynamics of tourism development in both regions.

Discussion. The historical development of tourism in the Alakol and Issyk-Kul regions represents a vivid manifestation of regional interconnections within the Central Asian space. Since ancient times, both lakes have served as centers of social and cultural communication, and through their natural and recreational potential, they have had a significant impact on the cultural patterns of everyday life. However, the dynamics and historical trajectories of tourism formation in these two regions were not identical. To clarify this statement, several key factors deserve special attention: historical continuity and regional similarities; differences in the pace of development; and the social and cultural influence of tourism. It should also be noted that certain periods in the development history of Alakol and Issyk-Kul have been overlooked in the study. For instance, during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, due to colonial and political transformations, these lakes became inaccessible to the local population. During the Tsarist Russian period, these regions, located in strategically important border areas, were subject to restricted mobility and state control over the use of natural resources. Such historical interruptions also influenced the subsequent trajectory of tourism development.

Focusing first on historical continuity and regional similarities, the parallels between Alakol and Issyk-Kul are primarily evident in their geographical and ecological characteristics. Both are saline lakes situated in high-mountain zones and are distinguished by their therapeutic waters and healing climate. From

a historical perspective, both regions were located along the ancient Silk Road (Zhibek Zholy), functioning as important nodes of trade and cultural exchange. These factors provided the natural and cultural prerequisites for the subsequent development of tourism in these areas.

During the Soviet period, the tourism sectors of both countries developed within the framework of a unified socialist system. During this period, although access to the lakes gradually increased, the local population's right to use recreational resources remained limited. The development of tourism infrastructure was primarily oriented toward visitors from outside the region, while the economic and traditional activities of local communities were relegated to the background. This factor continues to make the issue of balancing tourism development and the interests of local communities highly relevant today. The principal goal of tourism was to restore the health of workers and to promote a culture of collective recreation. Within this ideological framework, Issyk-Kul and Alakol were regarded as recreational spaces serving social welfare and public health purposes. The planned development strategies of that period later formed the structural foundation for the subsequent evolution of tourism in both regions.

The differences in the pace of tourism development between the Alakol and Issyk-Kul regions are closely linked to the political, economic, and infrastructural policies of their respective countries. The purpose of this comparison is not merely to highlight the differences between the two regions, but also to identify the general patterns of lake tourism development in Central Asia through an analysis of their respective models of growth. This comparative analysis holds practical significance in terms of improving regional tourism policy and promoting the principles of sustainable tourism. In Kyrgyzstan, tourism has been recognized as a priority sector of the national economy since the 1990s, and the country entered into international cooperation in this field relatively early. The Issyk-Kul region became an international tourist destination within the framework of programs implemented by the United Nations (UN) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

In contrast, large-scale development of tourism in the Alakol region of Kazakhstan has taken place only over the past decade. This process was largely driven by state programs aimed at promoting regional tourism and improving transport infrastructure. As a result of the State Program for Tourism Development for 2017–2025, Alakol has become one of the key centers of domestic tourism in Kazakhstan.

In both countries, tourism has exerted a significant social and cultural influence. However, the rapid development of tourism has had a dual impact on the social conditions of the local population. On the one hand, it has created new jobs and stimulated the growth of small businesses; on the other hand, it has led to issues such as increased environmental pressure and dependence on seasonal income. Addressing these problems requires a long-term regional policy that ensures social stability and ecological balance. It has affected the lifestyle of local communities, types of economic activities, and the formation of cultural self-awareness. In the Issyk-Kul region, through the development of ethnotourism, the Kyrgyz people's yurt culture, handicraft traditions, and national cuisine have gained recognition at the international level.

In the Alakol region, tourism is characterized by the ethnographic elements of the Kazakh people and by traditional hospitality practices. Overall, Kazakhstan possesses exceptionally rich natural landscapes and diverse tourism resources. Their effective utilization can enhance economic profitability, enable the assessment of regional tourism potential, and help identify development opportunities. Today, the number of visitors to Lake Alakol as a domestic tourism destination has been steadily increasing. One of the key contributing factors is the lake's favorable geographical position, its location near the border with China, and its positive impact on human health [Agybetova et al., 2023: 118].

The tourism potential of Kazakhstan's natural and recreational areas primarily depends on the efficient use of water resources. According to researchers, the country's annual river runoff amounts to 102.3 km³, of which 57.6 km³ is formed within its own territory [Sagin et al., 2017: 386]. The optimal use of water resources and the preservation of ecological balance are crucial factors for ensuring the sustainable development of tourism in lake regions. This process is particularly significant for enhancing the touristic attractiveness of lacustrine ecosystems such as Alakol and Issyk-Kul. Furthermore, the interrelation between the natural coastal environment and recreational services plays an essential role in maintaining the ecological and social sustainability of these territories [Chen and Ma, 2023: 11].

Thus, by conducting a comparative analysis of the tourism development dynamics of Alakol and Issyk-Kul, it is possible to identify the effectiveness of the interregional tourism policies of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, the mechanisms for the rational use of natural resources, and the potential of transboundary tourism. Based on these findings, the key issue of the study is to determine the historical continuity in ensuring the sustainable development of regional tourism and the rational use of natural and recreational

resources. This aspect enhances the scientific novelty of the research and increases the practical significance of its results. Moreover, this issue is one of the key aspects of ensuring the efficient use of the natural and recreational potential of Central Asia, strengthening regional cooperation, and forming a sustainable strategy for the development of cultural tourism. This, in turn, contributes to strengthening regional economic partnerships, maintaining ecological balance, and promoting cultural heritage through tourism.

In this regard, it is also important to identify the impact of climate change and anthropogenic factors, as well as new models of ecotourism and sustainable tourism. The Alakol and Issyk-Kul regions are viewed not only as natural recreational areas but also as spaces of spiritual experience. Such sacred landscapes play a significant role in the development of ecological and cultural tourism [Abdigaliyeva et al., 2022: 221]. Scientific research into these areas of tourism plays an essential role in planning the socio-economic development of the regions.

Results. The historical formation and development of tourism have been directly influenced by each region's natural conditions, social structure, and socio-economic transformations. In addition, it is important to systematize the impact of each historical period on regional tourism. The trade routes of ancient times, the restrictions of the colonial era, the planned tourism of the Soviet period, and the market relations of the years of independence – all of these factors contributed to the formation of the institutional foundation of modern tourism. Revealing the continuity between these stages ensures the historical depth of the research. Although the Alakol and Issyk-Kul regions are geographically similar, the stages and directions of their tourism development differ in several significant aspects.

To specify these distinctions, attention is given to the formation stages of tourism in both lakes – particularly to the tourism practices of the Soviet period and the processes of revival during the years of independence. In general, to provide a scientific characterization of the natural, hydrological, and recreational potential of Alakol and Issyk-Kul, the following comparative table can be presented (Table 1).

Table 1. Natural, hydrological, and recreational potential of Lake Alakol and Lake Issyk-Kul

Parameter	Alakol	Issyk-Kul
Location	In the southeastern part of Kazakhstan, on the border between Abai and Zhetysu regions	In the northeastern part of Kyrgyzstan, within the Tian Shan mountain system
Type	Saline-closed lake	Slightly saline, closed lake
Elevation above sea level	347 m	1607 m
Sources of inflow	Mountain rivers (Urjar, Katynsu, Emil, Tentek, etc.)	More than 80 rivers and springs (mainly Karakol, Jyrgalan, etc.)

As for the similarities between the two lakes, one of the main common features is their dependence on various inflowing rivers as primary sources of water. In addition, the term «closed lake» is equally applicable to both, representing one of their key hydrological similarities. The main differences, however, lie in their elevation above sea level, which varies significantly. Furthermore, the saline composition of the lakes distinguishes them: Alakol is characterized as a saline lake, while Issyk-Kul is only slightly saline. These differences also influence the ecological conditions and recreational potential of the lakes, shaping the specific features of tourism development in each region.

Ancient Period and the Soviet Experience. Both the Alakol and Issyk-Kul regions are located along the Great Silk Road (Zhibek Zholy), which historically served as a vital corridor for trade, cultural exchange, and spiritual interaction. Settlements and caravan routes near the lakes functioned as early centers of rest and healing. According to archaeological evidence, medieval cities such as Burana and Balasagun were located in the Issyk-Kul area, while the Alakol region served as a space of ethnic and cultural convergence between the Altai and Zhetysu territories. During this period, the prerequisites for tourism—namely, the understanding of natural-recreational potential and the use of healing resources—began to take shape.

Alakol (its ancient name meaning «Ot Köl» or «Shining, Multicolored Lake») is a saline, closed basin located in the southeastern part of the Republic of Kazakhstan. The lake lies within the Balkhash–Alakol depression, on the border between Abai and Zhetysu regions [Kazakh Encyclopedia, 2004]. Geographically,

the Dzungarian Gate Pass lies to the southeast of Alakol, significantly influencing the area's climatic and wind patterns. Due to its natural properties and mineral composition, Alakol is recognized as a «therapeutic lake» and holds an important place in recreational tourism and health-related activities [akimvko.gov.kz, 2019].

The Encyclopedic Dictionary of Brockhaus and Efron was a universal encyclopedia published in the Russian Empire between 1890 and 1907 by the Joint Stock Publishing Company «F. A. Brockhaus – I. A. Efron» (St. Petersburg). The publication consisted of 41 main volumes, 2 supplementary volumes, 82 half-volumes, and 4 additional half-volumes. It was considered one of the largest scientific and reference works of its time. In several of its volumes, the modern Alakol Lake was referred to as «Ala-Kul» and described as a geographical feature. This record demonstrates that the name «Ala-Kul» appeared in Russian geographical and cartographic literature at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. Consequently, the toponym «Ala-Kul» historically entered the regional geographical nomenclature earlier, while the Kazakh variant «Alakol» later became more widely used [Maly Encyclopedic Dictionary, 1907].

During the Soviet period, both regions were incorporated into the state-planned tourism system. The Issyk-Kul area became one of the major sanatorium and recreational centers of the Union, serving as the main tourism destination within the Kyrgyz SSR. Between the 1960s and 1980s, dozens of health resorts, boarding houses, and recreational facilities were constructed around the lake. Tourists from across the Soviet Union flocked to the region, and Issyk-Kul became a symbol of the socialist ideal of «labor rest».

Since the Soviet era, hydrogeological structures in the arid regions of Central Asia and Kazakhstan have been studied, revealing the influence of mountain ranges on the distribution and chemical composition of groundwater [Bogomolov and Dukhanina, 1977: 78]. Such regularities directly contributed to the natural formation of lake ecosystems such as Alakol and Issyk-Kul, as well as to the emergence of mineral water resources. These factors later became the foundation for the development of balneological and ecological tourism in both regions.

In contrast, tourism in the Alakol area developed more slowly. During this period, the social adaptation of the lakeside communities also deserves special attention. The local population, while adapting to the tourism infrastructure, sought to balance their traditional lifestyle with new forms of economic activity. For instance, through participation in the hotel business, transportation services, and the production of national cuisine, the social engagement of the local people has increased. Due to its remote location and limited infrastructure, Alakol remained for a long time a regional-level recreation site. Nevertheless, during the 1980s, the therapeutic properties of Alakol's waters were scientifically proven, leading to the establishment of the first tourist bases and health resorts. This gave a noticeable impetus to the further development of tourism in the region.

Development of Tourism in the Independence Period and Current Trends. After gaining independence, both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan began to view tourism as one of the priority sectors of their national economies.

In Kyrgyzstan, tourism in the Issyk-Kul region started developing at an international level. In the 2000s, the area was included in UNESCO and UNDP projects as the «Pearl of Central Asia.» Infrastructure was modernized, and foreign investments were attracted. Along the shores of Issyk-Kul, international hotels, recreation zones, and cultural festivals were established, contributing to the region's transformation into a major hub of international tourism.

In Kazakhstan, tourism in the Alakol region experienced a significant boost during the last decade. Since 2017, Alakol has been recognized as a national tourism brand and has received state-level support. Infrastructure development projects included the renovation of the Taldykorgan–Alakol–Usharal road and the modernization of airport facilities. As a result, by 2023, the number of visitors to Alakol reached nearly two million [Kazinform, 2016], highlighting the lake's growing role on Kazakhstan's national tourism map.

Furthermore, under the State Program for the Development of the Tourism Industry of the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2019–2025, the Alakol lakeside area was designated as a tourism cluster of national importance [Abaykyzy, 2025].

Famous for its healing mineral waters and picturesque landscapes, Alakol has in recent years become one of the fastest-growing centers of domestic tourism. However, its rich cultural heritage – including its historical connection with the Silk Road (Zhibek Zholy), nomadic traditions, folklore, and sacred practices – has not yet been sufficiently reflected in regional tourism strategies [Agybetova et al., 2025: 17].

The Concept for the Development of the Tourism Industry of the Republic of Kazakhstan until 2023 highlights the importance of developing beach tourism. The country's unique natural environment and

diverse tourism resources create favorable conditions for improving visitors' health and engaging in various forms of recreational activity [Agybetova et al., 2023: 119].

Table 2. Comparative analysis of the main indicators of Alakol and Issyk-Kul

Indicator	Alakol (Kazakhstan)	Issyk-Kul (Kyrgyzstan)
Main focus	Domestic and ecological tourism	International and cultural tourism
Seasonality	June – August	May – September
Infrastructure	Rapidly developing in recent years	Well-established since the Soviet period
State support	Tourism Development Programs (2017–2025)	«Issyk-Kul – The Pearl of Central Asia» project
Number of tourists (as of 2023)	≈ 2 million people	≈ 3,5 million people
Types of tourism	Recreational, health, ecological	Sanatorium, cultural, festival tourism

Comparative analysis shows that tourism in the Issyk-Kul region was historically established earlier and has gained international recognition. According to a joint study conducted by the Ministry of Economy and Commerce of the Kyrgyz Republic and the 2GIS service, by the end of August 2025, the number of tourist service facilities along the Issyk-Kul coastline had tripled compared to 2019. While in 2019 there were 360 public catering establishments operating in the Issyk-Kul region, by the end of the 2025 summer season their number had reached 963 [mineconom.gov.kg, 2025].



Fig. 1. The modern view of Lake Issyk-Kul

Note: The image was taken from the official website. URL: <https://mineconom.gov.kg>

We can observe that the Kyrgyz Republic is particularly interested in developing regional tourism, including tourism related to Lake Issyk-Kul. For example, Kyrgyzstan has launched the Sustainable Tourism Development Program until 2030 [Kabar, 2025].

The approved Sustainable Tourism Development Program aims to create favorable conditions for the development of a competitive, sustainable, and internationally recognized tourism industry and includes nine priority areas to be implemented by 2030.

These areas include: optimizing state policy in the tourism sector; developing the consumer market; digital transformation of the tourism services market; ensuring safety within the tourism industry; preserving and enhancing historical and cultural heritage, the natural environment, and ecological balance, among other key issues. The program outlines four main objectives (Figure 2).

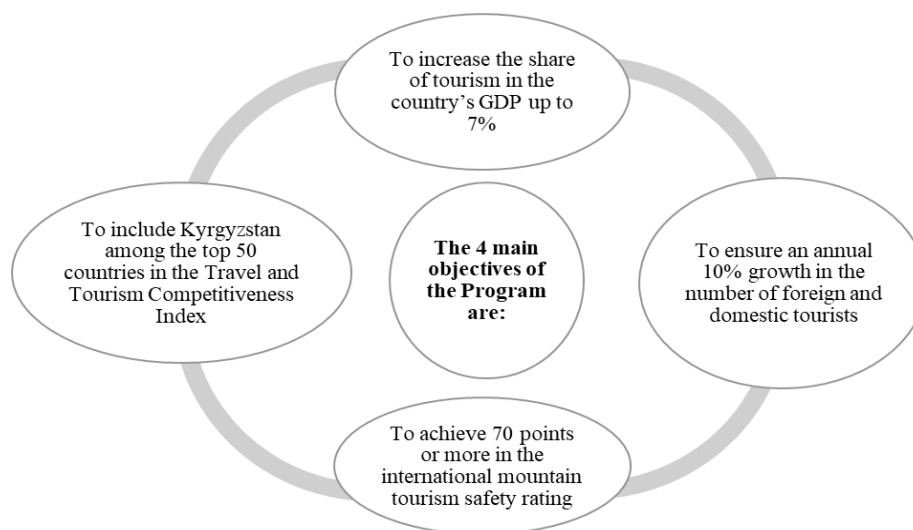


Fig. 2. The four main objectives of the Program

The program also provides a monitoring and evaluation system to ensure regular analysis of its implementation and the degree to which the stated objectives are achieved. It aims not only to develop the tourism industry but also to contribute to the economic growth of the regions, as well as the preservation of Kyrgyzstan's unique natural and cultural heritage. Additionally, the program emphasizes the importance of community engagement and inclusive development in the tourism sector. Special attention is given to involving local populations in tourism-related activities through training, entrepreneurship support, and the creation of small and medium-sized enterprises. Such an approach not only strengthens the economic capacity of local communities but also ensures that tourism development remains socially responsible and culturally sensitive. By integrating sustainability principles into every stage of planning and implementation, the program seeks to establish a long-term foundation for balanced growth that benefits both visitors and residents while safeguarding Kyrgyzstan's environmental integrity.

In contrast, Alakol tourism has experienced rapid growth in recent years and has become a national-level tourist brand. Between 2015 and 2023, the number of visitors to Alakol increased from 200,000 to 1.2 million. The majority of them (95–98%) are domestic tourists, while the share of foreign visitors remains relatively small. Infrastructure has significantly improved: the number of accommodation facilities has more than doubled, the share of private investment rose from 40% to 75%, and tourism revenue increased sixfold, reaching 8.1 billion tenge [Agybetova, et al., 2025: 19].

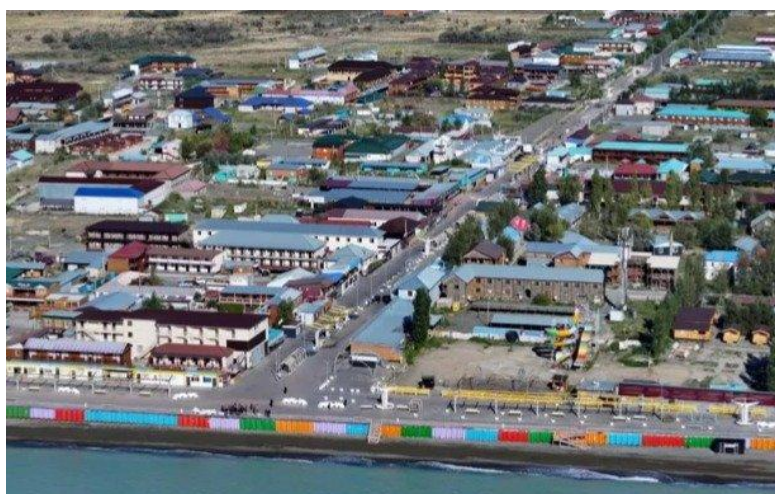


Fig. 3. The current view of Lake Alakol

Note: The image was taken from. URL: <https://www.inform.kz>

The development of tourism in Lake Alakol has been systematically implemented since 2017. During this period, large-scale reconstruction work was carried out along the Alakol coast. Roads were paved, and a lighting system was installed. In addition, a wide pedestrian area along the shoreline was planned, and concrete steps were taken to improve tourism infrastructure. These measures laid the foundation for enhancing the region's tourist appeal and effectively utilizing its recreational potential.

For safety purposes, 80 surveillance cameras were installed along the Alakol coast. Nearby, five police posts and two trauma care points operate to ensure visitors safety [Shakabayev et al., 2017].

In recent years, the government has undertaken specific measures to raise Alakol's tourism ranking and bring it to the international level. For instance, there are initiatives to attract Chinese investment for the regional development of tourism. According to Anuar Beissenov, head of the Department of Architecture, a special plan for the comprehensive development of the tourist zone is being prepared following the President's instructions. Currently, the beach area along the lake covers about 300 hectares, and there are plans to expand it. Considering the terrain features, the project provides for the extension of the left shore. The regional governor, Berik Uali, discussed prospects with Chinese investors. The companies «San Bao», «Wanzhan» and «Juding Group» proposed several projects, including an international hotel, eco-houses, a wellness center, a water palace, a center for folk culture, and other facilities [Zhualykyzy, 2025].

The picturesque Lake Alakol attracts thousands of tourists every year. However, with the increasing popularity of the resort, another issue has emerged — pollution of the shoreline, as reported by a Kazinform correspondent [Nigmatullina, 2025]. The aggravation of environmental problems may negatively affect the reputation of the tourist area and reduce the tourist flow. That is, the expansion of tourism has also exacerbated environmental and social issues. The accumulation of household waste along the lakeshores, the overuse of land and water resources, and the need for local communities to adapt to increased infrastructural pressure are among the most pressing challenges of the present period. Therefore, regional tourism policy must be aligned with the principles of environmental management and the protection of local community interests.

In both countries, tourism has contributed to the preservation of local culture and the strengthening of national identity. Tourism in this context should be viewed not only as an economic phenomenon but also as a mechanism for cultural representation and the preservation of the national code. The examples of Alakol and Issyk-Kul clearly demonstrate the social mission of tourism through the formation of regional identity and the revitalization of ethnocultural traditions. In the Issyk-Kul region, Kyrgyz traditional hospitality and ethno-folklore festivals have become integral parts of the tourist experience. Meanwhile, in the Alakol region, Kazakh yurt culture, traditional cuisine, and handicrafts enrich the ethnocultural content of tourism. Such initiatives are implemented to preserve cultural heritage and promote the development of national tourism brands.

Conclusion. The comparative analysis of the tourism history of the Alakol and Issyk-Kul regions made it possible to identify both commonalities and distinctive features in their development. Both areas possess significant natural and recreational potential and have deep cultural and historical traditions. However, their trajectories of tourism development were shaped by different historical and socio-economic conditions.

Firstly, from a historical continuity perspective, both lakes were important cultural and trade centers along the ancient Silk Road (Zhibek Zholy), which created early prerequisites for tourism. During the Soviet era, these foundations were further strengthened through the establishment of a planned recreation culture, and both regions gained the status of recreational zones.

Secondly, in the post-Soviet period, their rates of development diverged. Issyk-Kul tourism reached the international level earlier and became a key sector of the Kyrgyz economy, whereas Alakol tourism only gained national recognition in the past decade, receiving systematic support from the state.

Thirdly, from a cultural and social standpoint, the tourism systems of both regions contribute to the preservation and promotion of local ethnic identity. The development of ethnotourism and cultural tourism helps revive traditional elements of national culture, such as hospitality, folk art, and crafts.

Given these characteristics, it is crucial for both countries to focus on ecological sustainability, which remains a pressing issue. The rapid growth of tourism increases pressure on natural resources and poses a threat to the ecological balance of the lake ecosystems. Therefore, based on historical experience, it is essential to promote lake tourism that harmoniously integrates environmental protection and cultural preservation.

In conclusion, the historical and comparative analysis of tourism in the Alakol and Issyk-Kul regions reveals the broader patterns of regional tourism evolution in Central Asia. The findings of this research can be applied in developing regional history studies, cultural heritage preservation strategies, and tourism policy improvements in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

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