



Magic Altai – an undiscovered golden treasure

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Magic Altai has the potential to become a new destination brand name for Kazakhstan's part of the Altai Mountain Range. The name was coined by participants of an international expedition of experts travelling to the area in the summer of 2014 as part of efforts to help local people develop sustainable and locally suited ecotourism.

The group was enthralled by the unique aura the area seems to emanate and left charged with a great deal of positive energy. Altai, which means 'golden mountains' in Mongolic and Turkic languages surprised the expedition participants by the seemingly endless expanses of old-growth forest, clean meandering rivers and streams, lakes replete with fish and last, but not least, the peace and tranquillity of an area not disrupted by traffic noise or mass tourism – things most of Europe lost a long time ago. This maze of rugged peaks, mountain forests and lush valleys is a remarkable area of high ecological, cultural and historical value. Two large nature reserves and Katon-Karagai National Park (sites proposed for inscription onto the Unesco World Heritage list) underline the area's uniqueness and are evidence of its high potential for tourism and recreation, which are so far under-developed. In contrast to the neighbouring parts of Altai in Russia and China, which are visited by several millions tourists, only a few thousand find their way to the Kazakh part each year, mostly to a few spas and recreation sites near lakes.

Despite the great natural treasures surrounding them, people here live in quite poor conditions. Unemployment, bad roads, degradation of traditional culture and lifestyles lead many people to leave the small villages interspersed in the area. Local youth dream of going to cities and towns in search of a better life, and many young people decide to try their luck, but often do not find happiness and inner peace away from home. One possible solution to improving the situation for local residents is to develop rural tourism and accompanying services which respect local nature and culture.

To initiate positive changes by uniting people from different sectors in order to establish the basis for ecotourism development and creating cooperative partnerships of local leaders, entrepreneurs, craftsmen, protected area managers, representatives of non-governmental organizations, and tourist companies, an ambitious project entitled 'Golden Altai – wealth for local development' is being implemented by the environmental organization Machaon International (Slovakia), Gesäuse National Park (Austria) and a range of other European and regional partners such as EkoAltai, TeK and Bumerang (NGOs from East Kazakhstan). The project is the winner of a grant competition and the first in the region financed by the European Commission.

It is important to strike the proper balance between development and nature conservation, so that mistakes made elsewhere can be avoided. Therefore, exchange of know-how and experience is a crucial part of the project. During the expedition, European partners provided a lot of valuable suggestions. For instance, the experience of the Austrian National Park Gesäuse and the idea of its partner network are very interesting to residents and managers of Katon-Karagai National Park. Two symbols were developed by Dr. Elena Bukvareva – Partner of national park and Custodian of heritage. This is a new and unique approach for Kazakhstan, and we hope to see the first guesthouses and souvenir shops equipped with the symbols in Kazakh Altai in near future, as it is usual in Gesäuse.



In late October 2014, a group of representatives from local government (akimat), protected areas, tourist companies and non-governmental organizations visited several national parks in Austria and Slovenia to obtain first-hand experience of visitor management, guest and guide services. It is expected that some of the ideas gained through the study tour will be transferred and adapted to Kazakh conditions.

Alongside its capacity building component, the project also supports practical activities such as local infrastructure development (including suitable accommodation and catering for visitors), souvenir production, promotion of the region and other vital tourism-supporting services. The project also includes package tours like an unusual Dzhaylau tour in which visitors explore the alpine meadows of the Samyysakty ridge with a knowledgeable local guide. A balanced mix of tourist attractions, promotional materials and special events will be used to allow for better appreciation of the unique local heritage and recognition of the region as one of the most interesting global tourism destinations.

Altai Mountains in Kazakhstan still hide a lot of unexpected things waiting to be discovered. For instance, one may find a locally well known Austrian road leading from Katon-Karagay to the village Terekty near the Chinese border. The dirt road, which winds its way through breath-taking mountain scenery, got its name from the sad fact that it was constructed between 1914-1916 by forced labour of prisoners of war taken here from the at those times Austro-Hungarian empire. By ironic coincidence, one hundred years later specialists from the region (Slovakia, Austria, Czech Republic) happen to come there helping with promoting the road for tourism and sustainable development and as a symbol of our shared history and future.