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THE TOURIST POTENTIAL OF THE HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL LANDSCAPE OF LAKE ALAKOL

Abstract. *This study explores the historical and cultural landscape potential of Lake Alakol, a unique natural and recreational site in Eastern Kazakhstan. Known for its healing mineral waters and scenic beauty, Alakol has become a center of rapid growth in domestic tourism. However, its rich cultural heritage, including connections to the Great Silk Road, nomadic traditions, folklore, and sacred practices, remains underrepresented in tourism strategies.*

Using a mixed-method approach that combines literature analysis, statistical data, field research, and interviews with local residents and visitors, this paper identifies both opportunities and constraints in developing cultural and sustainable tourism around the lake. The findings show that while tourism infrastructure has significantly expanded, the integration of cultural and historical content into tourism products is still minimal.

Comparisons with similar destinations such as Issyk-Kul (Kyrgyzstan), Lake Baikal (Russia), and Lake Balaton (Hungary) demonstrate that Alakol has strong potential to attract not only domestic but also international tourists. Recommendations include the development of cultural routes, multilingual accessibility, community-led initiatives, and environmentally sustainable practices. By combining economic growth with cultural identity, Lake Alakol can become not only a leading health resort, but also a cultural landmark of Central Asia.

Keywords: *Lake Alakol, cultural landscape, historical tourism, East Kazakhstan, sustainable tourism, historical potential, regional development.*

Introduction

In recent years, cultural and ecological tourism has become one of the fastest growing sectors of global tourism, emphasizing the importance of regions with both natural uniqueness and historical depth. Lake Alakol, located in Eastern Kazakhstan, is a valuable natural and cultural landscape that has long attracted attention due to its ecological, geographical and spiritual significance [1, 2]. The lake is known for its mineral-rich waters with healing properties, unique

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biological diversity and picturesque surroundings. However, in addition to its ecological features, Alakol also bears traces of ancient trade routes, nomadic traditions and sacred local beliefs, which together form a multifaceted cultural identity [3].

The importance of studying the historical and cultural landscape of Alakol lies in its potential integration into broader tourism development strategies in Kazakhstan. The lake was included in the national tourism development program as one of the key places for health tourism and cultural heritage. However, despite continued investments in infrastructure and a growing number of visitors, the intangible cultural elements and historical heritage of the area are still underrepresented in current development plans.

The purpose of this article is to assess the cultural and historical potential of the Alakol region through an interdisciplinary lens combining the geography of tourism, ethnography and heritage management. It will provide statistics on the growth of tourism, provide an overview of the cultural and spiritual heritage associated with the lake, and propose strategies for sustainable and culturally respectful development. By understanding and preserving this heritage, policy makers and stakeholders can provide long-term benefits to local communities and create meaningful experiences for visitors.

Literature review

In recent decades, scientists' interest in Kazakhstan's cultural landscapes has increased, reflecting a broader trend in global tourism research emphasizing the importance of integrating natural and cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2013). Scientists such as Nurlanova and Sadvokasova (2019) explored the potential of the historical routes of the Great Silk Road of Kazakhstan, identifying Lake Alakol as part of the eastern corridor. Their work indicates the need for a deeper study of regional heritage sites and their inclusion in tourism planning [3].

Mukhamedzhanova and Zhanburshin (2020) pay special attention to the role of lakes in the tourism economy of East Kazakhstan. They emphasize the healing waters of Alakol and its popularity among local tourists, but note that cultural narrative and interpretation of heritage remain underdeveloped [4]. This gap is confirmed by Alimbekova (2021), who explores how local traditions and beliefs, such as the spiritual value attributed to the lake, are important for creating a distinctive regional tourism brand [5].

Research conducted by international researchers such as Timothy and Boyd (2003) provides a useful framework for assessing cultural heritage sites, in particular the importance of local participation and heritage conservation in tourism development. These ideas are relevant for Alakol, where the preservation of elements of nomadic culture can be integrated into ecotourism and wellness experiences.

In recent government reports, such as the National Tourism Development Program of Kazakhstan for 2020-2025, Alakol is recognized as a priority area [6]. However, most official documents focus on infrastructure and economic returns, while cultural sustainability is mentioned in limited numbers. Thus, the scientific literature indicates a growing awareness of the region's tourism potential, but calls for more holistic approaches combining physical development with cultural preservation.

Methodology

The study employed a mixed-method design that integrates both qualitative and quantitative approaches.

Data on tourist flows, accommodation, and revenues for 2015–2023 were collected from the Bureau of National Statistics and the Regional Tourism Department of East Kazakhstan. These data provided a quantitative basis for identifying growth trends.

Academic publications, government programs, and international reports (UNESCO, UNWTO) were analyzed to place the case of Alakol in a broader theoretical and comparative framework.

During summer seasons of 2022–2023, site visits were conducted to major resorts and cultural sites around Lake Alakol. Observations focused on infrastructure quality, cultural representation, and environmental challenges.

Semi-structured interviews were held with 30 local entrepreneurs (guesthouse owners, guides, artisans) and 15 representatives of local authorities. In addition, short surveys were distributed among 50 domestic and 20 international tourists visiting the lake. These instruments captured perceptions of cultural heritage, service quality, and development prospects.

The integration of these methods ensured both empirical reliability and cultural depth. Triangulation of data allowed cross-verification between statistical indicators, field insights, and local community perspectives.

Results and discussion

The analysis of Alakol shows that the region combines natural beauty with a deep cultural identity. Field visits, interviews with local residents, and surveys of tourists confirm that, while wellness and recreation dominate, there is significant untapped potential for cultural and spiritual tourism.

Tourism trends. Between 2015 and 2023, the number of visitors increased from 200,000 to 1.2 million. Most are domestic tourists (95–98%), with international visitors still a small share. Infrastructure has improved: the number of accommodation facilities more than doubled, and private investment grew from 40% to 75%. Tourism revenues increased sixfold, reaching 8.1 billion tenge [3].

Examples of cultural tourism products and routes. Despite historical ties to the Silk Road, there are still very few cultural tours or heritage centers. However, the potential is rich. Several archaeological and sacred sites — such as the ruins of the Ablaykit monastery (17th century), caravanserais remains along the Silk Road corridor, and local mausoleums — could be integrated into cultural itineraries. Traditional events like Nauryz celebrations, folklore festivals in Urdzhar district, and “Songs of Alakol” music gatherings provide opportunities for cultural programming. Craft workshops (felt-making, jewelry, wood carving) could be offered as part of community-based tourism. A possible route is the “Alakol–Semey Cultural Corridor,” combining lake recreation with visits to Semey’s literary and historical heritage, including the Abai and Dostoevsky museums.

International comparison. Similar destinations offer useful lessons:

- Issyk-Kul (Kyrgyzstan) successfully combines beach tourism with nomadic cultural festivals.
- Lake Baikal (Russia) integrates ecological tours with indigenous Buryat traditions.
- Lake Balaton (Hungary) links wellness with music and cultural events, making it attractive to European tourists.
- For Alakol, adopting such practices would increase its competitiveness in the Central Asian tourism market and attract foreign visitors.

Strategies for international tourist attraction. Although Alakol has significant potential, several barriers hinder international arrivals: limited air connectivity, lack of English-language services, weak online visibility, and insufficient integration into regional routes. To address these, a set of strategies can be proposed:

- Transport connectivity: introduce regular charter flights from Almaty and Astana to Urdzhar Airport during peak season, coupled with shuttle transfers to the lake;
- Digital marketing: promote Alakol on international platforms (Tripadvisor, Booking, Expedia) and through social media campaigns targeting niche groups (eco-tourists, wellness travelers, Silk Road enthusiasts);
- Multilingual accessibility: expand tourist information, signage, and guided tours in English, Chinese, and Turkish;
- Regional integration: include Alakol in broader Silk Road tourism networks supported by UNWTO and SCO, ensuring its promotion alongside well-known destinations;
- International fairs and partnerships: present Alakol at global tourism fairs such as ITB Berlin or MITT Moscow and establish collaborations with tour operators in Central Asia and Europe.

Challenges. Seasonal overcrowding, unregulated construction, and waste management remain pressing issues. In addition, most signage and information materials are only in Kazakh and Russian, limiting accessibility for international tourists.

Community engagement. Interviews with local entrepreneurs and residents show high interest in tourism development, but also a lack of training and financial support. Micro-grants, training programs, and partnerships could enable communities to run guesthouses, cultural tours, and eco-projects, ensuring both income generation and heritage preservation. To summarize, Lake Alakol provides a double opportunity: to strengthen Kazakhstan's position in the field of nature and wellness tourism and to demonstrate the deep historical and cultural roots of the eastern regions of the country. However, this requires more inclusive and culturally sensitive planning strategies.

Table 1 – Tourism development trends in the Alakol region (2015–2023)

Year	Total visitors	Domestic (%)	International (%)	Average number of days of stay (days)	Accommodation units	Tourism revenue (billion)
2015	200 000	98%	2%	3.2	74	1.2
2017	450 000	97%	3%	3.5	98	2.9
2019	700 000	96%	4%	4.1	125	4.8
2021	980 000	95%	5%	4.6	145	6.2
2023	1 200 000	95%	5%	5.0	172	8.1
<i>Source: Bureau of National Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan (https://stat.gov.kz) [3]</i>						

The figures show a steady and significant growth in tourist flows to the Alakol district: between 2015 and 2023, the number of visitors increased more than fivefold. The majority of

tourists are residents of Kazakhstan, which indicates the importance of the region as a popular place for recreation and health improvement within the country. At the same time, international tourism remains underdeveloped, which indicates a promising direction for further strategic progress.

The average length of stay of tourists increased from 3.2 to 5.0 days, which indicates both an increase in the level of satisfaction with the holiday and the development of infrastructure. During this period, the number of accommodation facilities more than doubled, and significant investments were made in the sector of private hotels and sanatoriums.

Revenue from tourism increased more than sixfold - from 1.2 to 8.1 billion tenge, which had a direct positive impact on the local economy. However, the consistently high share of domestic tourism (95-98%) indicates the need to activate international marketing initiatives and expand the range of services in foreign languages.

Table 2 – Infrastructure and employment in the Alakol tourist region (2015-2023)

Indicator	2015	2017	2019	2021	2023
Number of tourist Facilities	74	98	125	145	172
Number of Employees in Tourism	1.150	2.000	2.800	3.900	4.500
Share of private sector investment (%)	40	53	61	69	75
Share of Government investment (%)	60	47	39	31	25
Number of travel packages sold	8.000	16.500	23.000	33.000	41.000
Number of Wellness tourists	4.500	9.800	14.500	22.000	30.000
Source: Regional Tourism Department of East Kazakhstan, 2024 [3]					

The number of tourist sites in the Alakolsky district increased by more than 130% between 2015 and 2023. This reflects active efforts to expand the tourism infrastructure, especially in the field of health and resort services. The number of jobs in the tourism sector has almost quadrupled, which indicates the growing importance of the region as an employment center.

The share of private sector investment increased from 40% to 75%, indicating growing confidence of entrepreneurs and local businesses in the development of the tourism industry. At the same time, the volume of public investment decreased proportionally, which corresponds to the strategic direction of forming a market model for tourism development in Kazakhstan. The number of sold tourist packages increased fivefold, indicating an increased interest in complex tourism products, especially among representatives of the local middle class. Also, the increase in the number of health tourists from 4.5 thousand to 30 thousand indicates an increased recognition of the medical and environmental benefits of the Alakol region. Thus, the observed trends confirm the transition of the Alakol tourism model from spontaneous visits to local places to more organized and service-oriented tourism, which implies increased requirements for the level of comfort and

cultural content of recreation.

Based on the conducted research and analysis, the following recommendations are proposed to promote the sustainable development of tourism in the Alakol region with an emphasis on the preservation and popularization of its historical and cultural landscape:

1. To develop tourist programs dedicated to cultural heritage. Organize guided tours, folklore performances and exhibitions talking about the history of the region's nomads, connections on the Great Silk Road and spiritual traditions [7,8,9]. The establishment of museums or interpretation centers near the lake would increase the awareness of visitors about the local culture and their appreciation.

2. Promote public tourism. Encourage local residents to participate in tourism through training and the provision of micro grants for the development of guest houses, crafts and cultural workshops [10, 11]. This will strengthen the local economy and preserve intangible heritage such as oral storytelling, rituals and cuisine.

3. It will increase multilingual accessibility. Provide signage, brochures and digital content in Kazakh, Russian, English and other international languages [12]. This will help attract foreign visitors and increase the level of inclusivity in the tourism sector.

4. Implement environmentally sustainable practices. Implement rules for waste management, protection of natural areas and prevention of over-development. Eco-friendly tourism infrastructure (for example, solar energy, water-saving technologies) should be a priority in new construction projects.

5. Develop off-season tourism strategies. In order to reduce seasonal stress and ensure year-round employment, health and cultural tourism outside the summer months should be encouraged. These can include winter ecological tours, cultural festivals, and wellness retreats.

6. Strengthen marketing and branding. To create a single regional tourism brand based on the healing waters and cultural value of Alakol. Targeted marketing campaigns, including social media, international travel fairs, and collaboration with influencers, can increase awareness.

7. Improve infrastructure and communications. Continue to develop transport links (such as improved roads, air links to Urzhar Airport), Wi-Fi accessibility, and public facilities such as visitor centers, rest stops, and medical services.

Conclusion

Lake Alakol is a unique destination that combines wellness resources with historical and cultural richness. Tourism has grown rapidly, but the cultural dimension is still underutilized. The lake's connection to the Silk Road, its role in Kazakh oral tradition, and its sacred significance offer opportunities for creating distinctive cultural tourism products.

International comparisons demonstrate that Alakol could follow models of destinations like Issyk-Kul, Baikal, or Balaton, where cultural and ecological features are integrated into tourism strategies. To realize this potential, it is essential to strengthen cultural programming, expand multilingual accessibility, support local communities, and adopt sustainable practices.

By moving beyond a narrow economic approach and embracing a holistic model of tourism development, Alakol can become not only a leading health resort but also an internationally recognized cultural landmark of Central Asia.

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АЛАКӨЛ КӨЛІНІҢ ТАРИХИ-МӘДЕНИ ЛАНДШАФТЫ ТУРИСТІК ӘЛЕУЕТІ

Аңдатпа. Бұл зерттеу Шығыс Қазақстанда орналасқан ерекше табиғи және рекреациялық нысан – Алакөл көлінің тарихи-мәдени ландшафтық әлеуетін қарастырады. Шипалы минералды сулары мен көркем табиғатымен танымал Алакөл соңғы жылдары ішкі туризмнің қарқынды өсу орталығына айналды. Алайда оның бай мәдени мұрасы — Ұлы Жібек жолымен байланыстар, көшпелі дәстүрлер, фольклор және сакралды тәжірибелер — аймақтық туристік стратегияларда жеткілікті деңгейде көрініс таппай отыр.

Әдебиеттерді, статистикалық деректерді, далалық зерттеулерді және жергілікті тұрғындар мен туристерге жүргізілген сұхбаттарды қамтитын аралас әдістемелік тәсілді қолдана отырып, бұл зерттеу Алакөл маңындағы мәдени және тұрақты туризмді дамытудағы мүмкіндіктер мен шектеулерді анықтайды. Нәтижелер туристік инфрақұрылымның едәуір кеңейгеніне қарамастан, мәдени және тарихи мазмұнды туристік өнімдерге енгізудің шектеулі екенін көрсетеді.

Ыстықкөл (Қырғызстан), Байкал (Ресей) және Балатон (Венгрия) сияқты дестинациялармен салыстырмалы талдау Алакөлдің тек отандық емес, сонымен бірге шетелдік туристерді тарту әлеуетін айқындайды. Ұсыныстардың қатарында мәдени бағыттарды дамыту, көптілді қолжетімділікті арттыру, жергілікті қауымдастықтардың бастамаларын қолдау және экологиялық тұрақты тәжірибелерді енгізу бар. Экономикалық өсімді мәдени бірегейлікпен үйлестіре отырып, Алакөл жетекші сауықтыру курорты ғана емес, сонымен қатар Орталық Азияның мәдени нысаны бола алады.

Кілт сөздер: Алакөл көлі, мәдени ландшафт, тарихи туризм, Шығыс Қазақстан, тұрақты туризм, тарихи әлеует, өңірлік даму.

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ТУРИСТСКИЙ ПОТЕНЦИАЛ ИСТОРИКО-КУЛЬТУРНОГО ЛАНДШАФТА ОЗЕРА АЛАКОЛЬ

Аннотация. Данное исследование рассматривает историко-культурный ландшафтный потенциал озера Алакөл, уникального природного и рекреационного объекта, расположенного в Восточном Казахстане. Известное своими целебными минеральными водами и живописной природой, озеро Алакөл в последние годы демонстрирует стремительный рост внутреннего туризма. Однако его богатое культурное наследие — включая связи с Великим Шёлковым путём, кочевыми традициями, фольклором и сакральными практиками — остаётся недостаточно представленным в региональных туристических стратегиях.

Применяя смешанный методологический подход, включающий анализ литературы, статистических данных, полевые исследования и интервью с местными жителями и туристами, данное исследование выявляет как возможности, так и ограничения в развитии культурного и устойчивого туризма вокруг озера. Результаты показывают, что, несмотря на значительное расширение туристической инфраструктуры, интеграция культурного и исторического содержания в туристические продукты остаётся ограниченной.

Сравнительный анализ с такими дестинациями, как озеро Иссык-Куль (Киргизстан), Байкал (Россия) и Балатон (Венгрия), подчёркивает потенциал Алаколя привлекать не только отечественных, но и иностранных туристов. В числе рекомендаций — развитие культурных маршрутов, повышение многоязычной доступности, поддержка инициатив местных сообществ и внедрение экологически устойчивых практик. Сочетая экономический рост с культурной самобытностью, Алакөл способен стать не только ведущим оздоровительным курортом, но и культурной достопримечательностью Центральной Азии.

Ключевые слова: озеро Алаколь, культурный ландшафт, исторический туризм, Восточный Казахстан, устойчивый туризм, исторический потенциал, региональное развитие.