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ETHNOCULTURAL TOURISM POTENTIAL OF ALMATY: CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES, AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the opportunities for ethnocultural tourism in Almaty. Almaty is the largest metropolis in Kazakhstan. The city has a rich cultural heritage. It is home to a diverse population of people from different nationalities, with high ethnic and cultural diversity.

The purpose of this study is to assess the ethnocultural tourism potential of Almaty by identifying its key strengths, challenges, and development opportunities.

Methodology. The study used a mixed method. The researchers interviewed tourism industry professionals. Field observations were conducted. A list of the main ethnocultural sites in the city was compiled, and Google Reviews data on ethnocultural sites, along with a statistical analysis of the number of tourists visiting Almaty over the past five years, was processed using a qualitative analysis method and used to assess the visitor experience.

Originality / value of the research. The potential of ethno-cultural tourism of Almaty is determined by a comprehensive qualitative assessment.

Research problems. In the course of the study, a number of factors limiting the development of ethnocultural tourism in Almaty were identified. These include insufficient tourist infrastructure, a weak promotion of the city in the international tourism market, and the threat of excessive commercialization of cultural values.

Findings. The results show that in order to develop ethno-cultural tourism, it is necessary to improve the infrastructure, widely use digital and international marketing tools, develop cultural and cognitive interactive practices for tourists, strengthen the participation of local communities and organize large-scale ethno-cultural festivals.

Keywords: Ethnocultural tourism; Almaty; cultural heritage; sustainable tourism; Central Asia.

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INTRODUCTION

Cultural tourism is a growing trend in the world. This trend is aimed at exploring the cultural heritage of a region. It brings social benefits. It also brings economic benefits. Cultural tourism serves as a mechanism for connecting with the historical, artistic and traditional experiences of local communities. Cultural tourism combines a number of tangible and intangible elements into a single tourism product. This product not only creates economic value for local communities and visitors, but also strengthens cultural value [1].

In recent decades, this tourism segment has expanded significantly. As tourists are increasingly interested in authentic and immersive experiences. Mukatova and colleagues describe ethnocultural tourism as a special type of cultural tourism. Ethnocultural tourism encompasses ethnic identity. It also encompasses cultural identity. It also combines the idea of preserving heritage. Within this broad field, Mukatova defines ethnocultural tourism as a special type of cultural tourism. The researcher focuses on ethnic and cultural identities and devel-

ops the idea of heritage preservation. Ethnocultural tourism is integrated into a comprehensive tourism product that creates economic value for local people and visitors and contributes to the protection of local culture [2].

Cultural tourism has become one of the most dynamic segments of the tourism industry worldwide. It is associated with tourists' interest in discovering the cultural heritage of certain regions and local ways of life. This type of tourism is a source of not only economic, but also significant social benefits. Tourism currently serves as a channel for travelers to connect with historical, artistic and traditional experiences.

Almaty, the largest city in Kazakhstan and the former capital of the country, offers a particularly rich context for the development of ethnocultural tourism. The city is often described as a crossroads of cultures. The legacy of the Silk Road has shaped its urban landscape. This city, with its distinct Soviet past, is unique. In addition to its historical value, Almaty is also known for its multifaceted cultural identity. The global rise of cultural tourism offers Almaty significant opportunities to exploit its unique cultural resources. However, tourism in the region has so far been largely focused on natural attractions. Mountainous areas such as the Zailiyskiy Alatau have attracted visitors for many years. The city's ethnocultural potential has not yet been systematically explored and promoted [3].

Therefore, Almaty needs to structurally develop and promote its ethnocultural resources. Such efforts can strengthen the city's position as a leading cultural destination in Central Asia. They will also increase its visibility in the international tourism market. This situation demonstrates the relevance of this research topic. The concept of ethnocultural tourism places special emphasis on the participation and authenticity of local people. This is considered a key condition for sustainable development. According to Ibrahim and Falola, the active participation of local communities is essential for tourism initiatives to bring tangible benefits. Such benefits include the creation of new jobs, the revival of cultural traditions, and the improvement of local infrastructure [4].

This approach is in line with current global trends. Volovik and colleagues argue that cultural heritage should be considered not only as an attraction, but also as a tool for socio-economic development that supports inclusive growth and community well-being [5].

The principles of sustainable development form the basis of modern cultural tourism strategies. Fedorova and colleagues note that the preservation of natural and cultural heritage is important for protecting the authenticity of ethnocultural destinations and ensuring their long-term attractiveness [6]. These issues are particularly relevant for the city of Almaty. The city is undergoing rapid urbanization, and commercialization is also increasing. As a result, traditional practices may be marginalized, and some heritage sites may be at risk of deterioration or loss.

In this regard, the purpose of this study is to assess the ethnocultural tourism potential of Almaty by identifying its key strengths, challenges, and development opportunities.

It also proposes sustainable development strategies. These strategies aim to balance tourism growth with cultural authenticity. They also take into account the well-being of local communities [1]. In addition, the expected outcomes of the study include the identification of priority areas for ethnocultural tourism development, classification of key ethnocultural assets, and formulation of practical recommendations for sustainable tourism development in Almaty.

Literature review. Defining the concept of ethnocultural tourism

Currently, ethnocultural tourism is considered an independent and important segment of the tourism industry. It has a main feature. It is focused on the traditions, practices and cultural heritage of specific ethnic communities.

One of the first researchers to systematically describe this type of tourism was Smith. He explained ethnocultural tourism as the process of presenting to tourists the "unique" customs and traditions of local and indigenous ethnic groups. At the same time, he highlights the "exotic" aspect of these traditions [7].

Subsequent researchers, including Graburn, contributed to the further development of interest in "exotic" destinations [8]. They paid attention to the interrelation of culture and nature in the practice of ethnotourism.

Wood further developed this concept. He focused on experiences based on the active participation of the tourist. That is, the tourist is not just an outside observer. Cultural uniqueness is expressed through live cultural tours. It is also revealed through performances and specially organized cultural events [2; 9].

By the beginning of the 21st century, ethnocultural tourism had become a complex, multifaceted concept. It was closely related to issues of cultural and environmental sustainability. Polukhina and Galla noted the dual role of ethnotourism [10; 11]. First, it enhances intercultural understanding. Second, it contributes to the socio-economic development of local communities.

These works highlight the importance of balancing the pressures of preserving cultural heritage with commercialization [12]. In this way, the authenticity and integrity of cultural experiences are protected.

The evolution of the concept of ethnotourism reflects the changing demand for tourism. It also reflects the development of scientific thought. In the late 1970s, ethnotourism was mainly associated with the study of the unique customs of “exotic” communities [7].

In the 1980s, the concept expanded. The trend of integrating natural and cultural elements in the tourist product intensified [8]. In the 1980s–1990s, a new priority emerged. The focus shifted to “living cultural tours”. Here, the tourist is directly involved in cultural experiences. He or she becomes intimately acquainted with the daily lives of local communities, including indigenous peoples [9; 13].

By 1994, Van den Berghe noted a new aspiration of tourists. Tourists want to understand the traditions of other ethnic groups more deeply. They do not want to simply observe from a distance. On the contrary, they seek to develop cultural empathy [13].

Wang highlights cultural diversity as one of the main resources of ethnocultural tourism [14]. They argue that it has the potential to offer authentic and unique tourism experiences based on local identity and local identity.

Tomczewska-Popowycz and Taras introduced the concept of “roots tourism” [15]. This term refers to travelers visiting the places where their ancestors lived. It also includes trips to areas where specific ethnic groups and indigenous peoples are concentrated. Nowadays, ethnocultural tourism has become an integral part of the global tourism industry. This has been influenced by the demand for authenticity, immersive travel, and meaningful interaction with local cultures.

Williams and Simoinsch examine the intersection of ethnocultural tourism and ecotourism [12]. They argue that this intersection can support the principles of sustainable tourism. They also argue that it can bring tangible socio-economic benefits to local communities.

Their findings are consistent with research in Southeast Asia. Initiatives in Thailand and Vietnam demonstrate that ethnocultural tourism can stimulate economic development while also helping to preserve traditional crafts, rituals, and ways of life [16].

Based on a review of scientific literature, the interpretations of the concept of “ethnotourism” given by various authors are systematically presented (Table 1).

Table 1 – The Approaches to the Definition of the “Ethno-tourism” Concept

Author(s) and Year	Definition/Key Idea
V. Smith (1977)	Ethnotourism is often described in terms of showcasing the unique, “interesting” customs and traditions of “exotic” communities.
N. Graburn (1978)	Describes ethno-tourism as visiting ‘exotic’ destinations where culture and nature merge.
R.E. Wood (1980)	Highlights cultural identity by advertising unique experiences where tourists can participate in ‘live culture tours’ or observe staged performances.
R.W. McIntosh & C.R. Goeldner (1990)	Defines ethno-tourism as traveling to explore the unique lifestyles and cultural expressions of indigenous communities.
Van den Berghe (1994)	Describes ethno-tourism as an aspiration to understand and learn about the traditions of different ethnic groups.
A.N. Polukhina (2016)	Positions ethno-tourism as a means of fostering communication and cultural exchange, with the aim of integrating local culture into world heritage.
Y. Wang, H. Shen, Sh. Ye, L. Zhou (2020)	Describes ethno-tourism as centering on different cultures as the primary tourist attraction, offering tourists unusual cultural experiences.
N. Tomczewska-Popowycz & V. Taras (2022)	Defines ethno-tourism as including both ‘roots tourism’ (visiting one’s homeland) and visiting places inhabited by exotic ethnic groups or tribes.
Note – Compiled by the authors.	

In the context of ethnocultural tourism, digital technologies have increased accessibility. They have also increased the popularity of this type of tourism. Buhalis and Law explain the concept of eTourism. They describe it as a transformative force. This force allows destinations to more effectively present their cultural resources to a global audience. An example is the experience of Peru. This country has introduced local storytelling into digital campaigns. This approach demonstrates the potential for effective use of online platforms [17]. Promoting cultural heritage is easier. Attracting international tourists is also easier. Such trends are important for emerging ethnocultural destinations. They want to increase their competitiveness in the global tourism market.

The context of ethnocultural tourism in Almaty.

As the largest city and former capital of Kazakhstan, Almaty is a special object of study. The city is important from the point of view of ethnocultural tourism. It was one of the cultural and trade centers along the ancient Silk Road.

Harris describes the cultural heritage of Almaty [18]. He explains this heritage as a complex synthesis. Here, Kazakh nomadic traditions are visible. Russian influence is added. There is also a contribution from Uyghur, Korean and other ethnic communities. This multicultural structure is reflected in the architecture of the city. It is also noticeable in the culinary culture. It is also reflected in festivals and everyday cultural practices. As a result, a multi-layered cultural space is formed. It mixes pre-Soviet, Soviet and modern elements [3].

It is also important to preserve the nomadic heritage of the rural areas surrounding Almaty. This situation can strengthen the ethnocultural tourism potential of the city. There are practices related to nomadic traditions. For example, kusbegilik (the Kazakh tradition of eagle hunting), yurt weaving, atbegili (traditional horse training). Such practices allow for the creation of a deeply penetrating tourist product. These products correspond to the global interest in authentic and experiential tourism.

However, Ilyasov's works show a different situation [1; 19]. Historically, the city's tourism industry has prioritized natural objects. For example, the Trans-Ili Alatau and nearby ski resorts were often promoted. Cultural and historical resources remain in second place. For this reason, the ethnocultural segment is still underdeveloped.

A number of structural constraints hinder the development of ethnocultural tourism in and around Almaty. Mac Cannell draws attention to the danger of over-commodification of cultural experiences [20]. He argues that over-presentation for tourists can weaken authenticity. As a result, living traditions become mere spectacles.

This warning is particularly relevant for Almaty. If cultural projects are not carefully managed, the integrity of traditional customs and rituals can be threatened. In addition, there are infrastructural constraints. This is particularly evident in rural and peri-urban areas. Access to key cultural facilities is poor.

Kudaibergenova highlights a number of key issues [21]. Transport infrastructure is inadequate. Basic services are not fully provided. Visitor infrastructure is also poorly developed. These factors significantly hinder the development of sustainable cultural tourism products.

Almaty's international recognition of cultural tourism is also low. This is also a significant limitation. According to Rudenko and Johnson, targeted marketing strategies are needed [22]. It is also important to establish partnerships with international tour operators. Such steps will help to position Almaty as a competitive cultural destination in Central Asia.

At the policy level, Kazakhstan has recognized the strategic importance of cultural tourism. The Kazakhstan-2050 strategy lists the preservation of national identity as a priority [23]. The goal is also to develop tourism based on cultural and historical sites. Several works are being carried out in Almaty in accordance with these priorities. New museums and cultural centers are opening in the city. Existing facilities are being renovated. International cultural festivals, such as "The Spirit of Tengri", are being held. These initiatives are aimed at strengthening the city's reputation as a cultural center. The target region is Central Asia. At the same time, they are aimed at attracting domestic and foreign tourists.

However, research shows that a single and coordinated strategy is not enough [1; 24]. This is especially evident in the direction of ethnocultural tourism in Almaty. The sector is still behind tourism focused on natural objects. Cultural resources are not promoted enough. They are not systematically included in large-scale tourism products.

Researchers like Galla and Abuev offer important insights. They advocate community-based tourism models, where local residents participate in preserving their heritage. They also play an active role in presenting

it to visitors. Such approaches can be combined with digital marketing tools. They also need to implement sustainable management practices. Then Almaty can turn its multicultural heritage into a competitive ethnocultural tourism product. This product will benefit both the local population and visitors to the city.

Materials and Methods

Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods research design, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches. The purpose of this study is to assess the ethnocultural tourism potential of Almaty by identifying its key strengths, challenges, and development opportunities. The research is based on three qualitative methods: the inventory of national cultural tourism resources, semi-structured interviews with industry experts, and field observations at tourist attractions.

In the first stage, an inventory was conducted to determine the ethnic cultural tourism resources of Almaty City. Objects with tourism significance and national cultural content were selected, and they were divided into five content groups.

In the next stage, semi-structured interviews were conducted with experts directly involved in the field of ethnic cultural tourism. The 18 respondents who participated in the interview (Table 2) were selected based on the principle of targeted sampling, that is, their professional experience and industry knowledge were the main criteria.

The interview guide consisted of four open-ended questions. These questions covered the following issues:
Definition of the concept of ethnocultural tourism and ways to interpret it;
The role of ethnocultural values in attracting tourists;
Identification of the most attractive ethnocultural sites in Almaty;
Factors hindering the development of ethnocultural tourism in the city and strategies to overcome them.

Table 2 – Description of respondents who participated in the interview

Respondent	Organization type	Years of experience	Number
Tourism managers	Skyway Travel	5-8 years	7
Tourism Consultant	Visit Almaty	3-5 years	3
Tour guides	Private tour guides	6-7 years	5
Experts in the field of culture	Museum, theater	7-10 years	3
Total			18

Note – Compiled by the authors.

In addition, tourist reviews on open online platforms such as Google Reviews were analyzed to identify their views, satisfaction levels, and common comments about ethnocultural tourism facilities.

Also, as part of the study, the method of field observation was used. The control was carried out by the author of the study himself. The assessment of the facilities took into account the level of accessibility, cultural originality, features of interaction with visitors, the state and aesthetic attractiveness of the infrastructure. In order to systematize the assessment, it was evaluated on a 5-point scale, but this was not used to conduct quantitative analysis, but to regulate and comparative interpretation of qualitative characteristics.

The processing of the collected data was carried out using the method of qualitative thematic analysis (thematic analysis). At first, the interview texts and Control notes were fully studied, and semantically significant fragments were identified. Later, open coding was carried out, and similar codes were combined. On this basis, the main topics were formed that were compatible with the purpose of the study.

Ethical considerations were taken into account throughout the research process. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study prior to the interviews, and their voluntary consent to participate was obtained. The anonymity and confidentiality of respondents were ensured, and no personal data were disclosed. The study was conducted in accordance with general ethical standards for social science research.

Results

In the context of assessing the ethnocultural tourism potential of Almaty, the study first examined general tourism dynamics in the city. Since official statistics on visitor numbers for individual ethnocultural tourism facilities are unavailable, overall tourist arrival statistics in Almaty were used as an indirect indicator of tourism growth and increasing demand for cultural experiences (Figure 1).

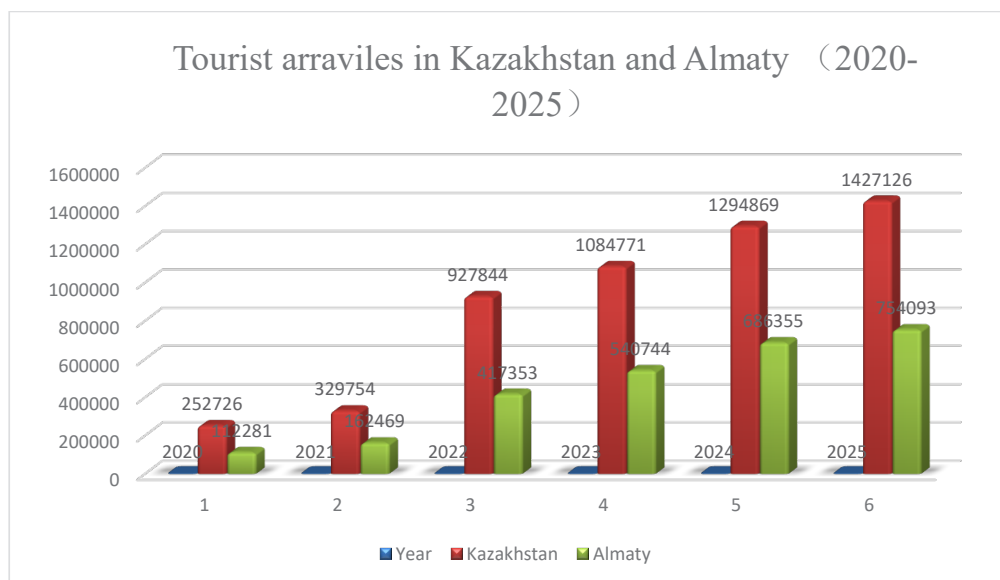


Figure 1 – Tourist arrivals in Kazakhstan and Almaty
Note – Compiled by the authors based on [25].

The identified growth in tourist arrivals indicates increasing tourism activity in Almaty and creates favorable conditions for the further development of ethnocultural tourism. In this context, the study proceeded to identify and evaluate the main ethnocultural tourism resources of the city through resource inventory, expert interviews, visitor review analysis, and field observations.

As a result of the inventory in order to identify ethnocultural tourist resources in Almaty, a total of 49 ethnocultural objects were identified in Almaty and classified into five main groups (Table 3):

Museums (10 objects) - for example, the Central State Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Also the Museum of Folk Musical Instruments.

Theaters (10 objects) - including the Kazakh State Academic Opera and Ballet Theater named after Abai. As well as the Kazakh State Academic Drama Theater named after M. Auezov and other stage organizations.

Festivals (17 events) - for example, The Spirit of Tengri festival. As well as cultural holidays such as Nauryz meiramy.

Ethnoauls (2 objects) - places such as Nomad, Gunny. Here, a format is offered that allows guests to get acquainted with nomadic traditions in depth.

National restaurants (10 objects) - places offering traditional Kazakh cuisine. These include such objects as Sandyk, Shanyrak.

Table 3 – Ethnocultural attractions in Almaty

	Museum	Theater	Festival	Ethno Village	National restaurant
1	Kazakh national museum	Kazakh State Academic Drama Theatre	Nur-Aymak festival	Ethno village Gunny	Sandyk
2	State Central Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan	Abai Kazakh National Opera and Ballet Theatre	Spirit of Tengri Festival	Ethno village Nomad	Zhailau

	Museum	Theater	Festival	Ethno Village	National restaurant
3	Museum of Science and Technology	M. Auezov Kazakh State Academic Drama Theatre	Apple Festival		Tarih
4	Al-Farabi Museum	M.Yu.Lermontov State Academic Russian Drama Theatre	Almaty Food Fest		Kishlak
5	Museum of the History of Almaty	G. Musrepov State Academic Theatre for Children and Youth	Nauryz Festival		Zheruyik
6	Mukhhtar Auezov Museum	Republican German Drama Theatre	Almaty Film Festival		Auyl
7	Mining Museum	Zhambyl Kazakh State Philharmonic	Kazakh National Music and Dance Festival		Alasha
8	Museum of Musical Instruments of Kazakhstan	Almaty State Puppet Theatre	Almaty International Ethno-Cultural Festival		Shanyrak
9	Almaty Art Gallery	Almaty Theatre	International Culture Days		Abay
10	Ertis Museum	Almaty State Academic Musical Comedy Theatre	Almaty Street Culture Festival		Navat
11			Kymyz Festival		
12			Bauyrsak Festival		
13			ArtBat Fest		
14			Shymbulak Ski Fest		
15			Almaty International Arts Festival		
16			Almaty Wine Fest		
17			Almaty Rock Fest		

Note – Compiled by the authors.

Semi-structured interviews

Interviews with 18 tourism professionals provided additional data. They highlighted the opportunities and challenges in developing ethnocultural tourism in Almaty. The interviews provided extensive and insightful information about the role of ethnocultural tourism. The most attractive aspects were identified. The main obstacles to the industry were also mentioned.

According to respondents, ethnocultural tourism allows visitors to see the traditions, customs, and everyday life of local communities with their own eyes. According to one expert, ethnocultural tourism helps travelers gain a deeper understanding of local heritage. This increases understanding between cultures and strengthens mutual respect.

This type of tourism is particularly important for Kazakhstan. Because the country has a high ethnic and cultural diversity. This is one of the main signs of national identity. Another expert has something to say. In his opinion, through festivals, traditional crafts and national cuisine, tourists better understand the history of the country. They also get deeper information about modern culture.

There is a common theme that is often repeated in many interviews. It is the growing demand for authenticity. Modern tourists do not want to just go for a walk. They choose deep, emotional and experiential types of tourism.

Popular ethnocultural sites

Respondents consistently mentioned some “flagship” sites. These sites best demonstrate the cultural diversity of Kazakhstan. The Central State Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan was often mentioned. Experts describe it as the main center of ethnocultural tourism in Almaty. One expert called the museum a “gateway”. In his opinion, tourists begin to study the history of the country here. They can also get acquainted with cultural diversity here. He considers this museum a must-see on any cultural itinerary.

Ethnic villages such as Nomad and Gunny also received high marks. Their main feature is the opportunity to immerse themselves in traditional practices. For example, they can see how a yurt is made. They can ride horses. They can listen to folk music being performed.

According to one respondent, ethnocultural villages provide tourists with an “unparalleled opportunity.” which historically formed the basis of Kazakhstan’s cultural identity. Festivals were also mentioned frequently. They have become a major attraction for both international and domestic tourists. The Spirit of Tengri and Nauryz festivals were highly rated because they vividly showcase music, art, and traditional customs.

According to one interviewee, these festivals do more than just showcase cultural heritage. They bring together guests from different countries. This allows people to better understand each other's cultures.

Respondents also mentioned some problems. During the holidays, people gather too many people. There are difficulties in organizing and providing services. Such situations can worsen the overall impression of visitors. According to experts, there are several main problems that hinder the sustainable development of ethnocultural tourism in Almaty. The main one is the weak infrastructure. This is especially noticeable in rural and suburban areas. Many ethnocultural facilities are located in these areas.

Some respondents noted that the roads to many facilities are poor. There are few hotels and other places to stay. Basic services (food, toilets, information) are insufficient. Therefore, it is difficult to get to these facilities. They also become less attractive for tourists. Many experts believe that special investment is needed in rural and regional infrastructure. Then ethnocultural facilities in remote areas can fully demonstrate their potential.

Another important problem is the risk of excessive "commercialization" of traditions. Some experts say that the demand for ethnocultural tourism is growing. As a result, sometimes traditions are presented to tourists in a light, superficial way. Sometimes they are organized only as a show. In this case, the true cultural content is reduced, and the deep meaning of the tradition is lost.

In this regard, cultural sensitivity was mentioned as a particularly important factor. Respondents stressed the need to educate tourists and local communities in a spirit of mutual respect. In their opinion, ethnocultural tourism should maintain a delicate balance between showcasing tradition and preserving its integrity. In general, respondents emphasized the importance of ethnocultural tourism. In their opinion, this industry helps to introduce Kazakhstan’s diverse heritage to a wide audience. It is also considered an effective tool for increasing the country’s tourist attractiveness.

Limited marketing also hinders growth. International recognition is low. A number of experts noted that Kazakhstan's cultural experience is still insufficiently reflected in the global tourism market. Targeted marketing campaigns are needed to attract the attention of an international audience. It is important to increase the volume of digital promotion. Close cooperation with international tour operators is also needed. This will create an opportunity to attract new tourist segments.

Perceived development directions (based on expert interviews)

The following development directions are derived from expert interviews and reflect the perceptions of industry professionals regarding the future of ethnocultural tourism in Almaty. This is the effective promotion of ethnocultural tourism. As well as a set of strategies to overcome the above-mentioned problems.

Many experts said that it is important not only to preserve, but also to actively promote local traditions. Investments in supporting folk art are needed. Support for festivals is important. It is also necessary to develop traditional crafts. According to experts, these steps will help maintain authenticity. At the same time, they will strengthen the uniqueness of Almaty's tourism offer. Respondents noted the importance of developing interactive formats. Such formats will provide visitors with a memorable and meaningful experience. For example, master classes in cooking national cuisine. Homestay programs. Cultural trainings. Various master classes.

Improving infrastructure is a frequently mentioned recommendation by experts. They pay particular attention to rural areas. According to experts, the first thing to do is to repair roads. It is also important to increase the number of hotels and other accommodation. It is necessary to install information boards and directional signs. Such steps will make it easier to visit remote ethnocultural sites. At the same time, they will increase their attractiveness for tourists.

Proper management of sustainable tourism is also important. There are two main tasks in this direction. First, it is necessary to teach local residents to interact with tourists correctly. Second, it is necessary to intro-

duce responsible tourism models. Here, income generation and preservation of cultural and natural heritage are considered together.

Such approaches will help to ensure the long-term sustainable and harmonious development of ethnocultural tourism.

Prior to the field observations, an analysis of visitor reviews from Google Reviews was conducted. This preliminary stage helped identify the main strengths and weaknesses of ethnocultural tourism facilities and provided a basis for the subsequent field evaluation.

Google review analysis shows that the overall opinion of visitors to ethnocultural tourism facilities in Almaty is positive, as shown in the table. The main advantages are interactive activities (horseback riding, archery, eagle show), cultural experience, and suitability for family vacations. In addition, these facilities are often noted for their educational and cultural cognitive value. However, the main disadvantages are insufficient information, unclear event schedules, and in some cases, poor organization (Table 4). Ethnotourism in Almaty has high experiential and cultural appeal, but needs to improve information accessibility and organizational quality.

Table 4 – Analysis of visitor reviews of ethnocultural tourism facilities in Almaty based on Google Reviews

Category	Object	Positive themes	Negative themes	Number of reviews analyzed
Museums	Central State Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan	Cultural richness Historical heritage Educational value	Language barrier Lack of structure Comparative dissatisfaction	32
Museums	Museum of Folk Musical Instruments	Preservation of musical heritage Cultural authenticity Affordable access	Smaller scale Limited exhibition space Limited depth of information	30
Theatres	Abay Kazakh state Academic Opera and Ballet Theater	Cultural richness Historical heritage	Language barrier Pricing concerns	55
Theatres	Almaty Theatres	Performance quality Cultural atmosphere	Language barrier Dress code expectations	63
Theatres	Lermontov Russian Drama Theatre	Modern architecture Comfortable seating	Parking difficulties Security check complaints	49
Ethno village	Gunny Ethnic Village	“Gives a good insight into the nomadic lifestyle” “a culturally informative experience”	Some reviews show this place as an organized tourist format and not as a “real village”	43
Ethno village	NOMAD Ethnic Centre	Fun activities Great for kids and families	Limited time Information is scarce	29

Note – Compiled by the authors.

Field observations were conducted at 10 sites selected from the list of ethnocultural sites. The selection fully covered five categories of ethnocultural sites. The sample was as follows:

2 museums (e.g., Central State Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Museum of Folk Musical Instruments);

2 theaters (e.g., Abai Kazakh State Academic Opera and Ballet Theater, G. Musrepov State Academic Theatre for Children and Youth);

2 festivals (e.g., Spirit of Tengri, Nauryz meiramy);

2 ethnovillages (e.g., Nomad, Gunny);

2 national restaurants (e.g., Sandyk, Shanyrak).

A single evaluation form was used for each site. The evaluation was conducted on a 5-point Likert scale. 1 point – “low”. 5 points – “very high”. The main observation criteria used for evaluating ethnocultural sites are presented (Figure 3).

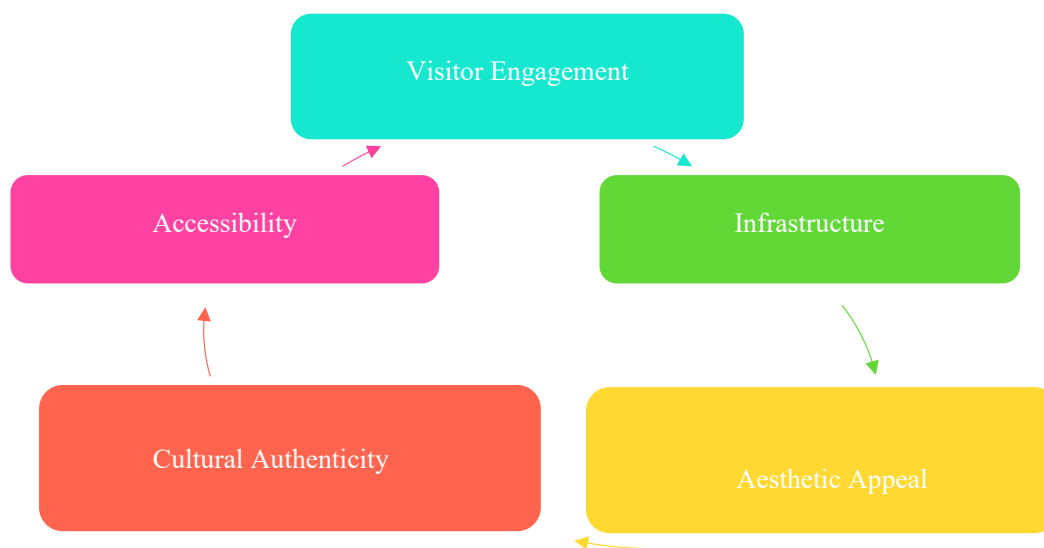


Figure 2 – Observation criteria
Note – Compiled by the authors.

The following criteria were used to assess the site:

Accessibility – ease of access to the site. Quality of transport connections. Clarity of directional signs.

Cultural authenticity – the extent to which traditional customs, rituals, and practices are displayed and preserved.

Visitor engagement – the quality and variety of interactions between visitors and the facility. For example, excursions, performances, master classes, interactive events.

Infrastructure and amenities – the availability and quality of basic services such as sanitation, parking, public catering, information points.

Aesthetic appeal – the appearance of the facility, the spatial environment, the general atmosphere.

The score for each dimension was recorded separately for all facilities. This data was then used to make comparisons between categories. The strengths and weaknesses of individual facilities were identified. Priority areas for improvement were also identified. The table provides an overview of ethnocultural objects in Almaty. It shows the relative strengths and weaknesses of each object (Table 5).

Among them, the Central State Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan was highly rated. This is because it has a large number of expositions related to Kazakh history. There is also a lot of material on nomadic culture. This offers visitors a deep and authentic cultural experience.

The Museum of Folk Musical Instruments is an important facility. The museum hosts interactive live music sessions that introduce traditional musical instruments. Visitors can see Kazakh national instruments up close and hear their sounds live. This greatly enriches their cultural experience.

In general, museums play an important role in preserving the cultural identity of the city. They also contribute to increasing the cultural and tourist attractiveness of Almaty. They form a solid foundation for the development of ethnocultural tourism.

Theaters, especially the Kazakh State Academic Opera and Ballet Theater named after Abai, received high marks. They are easily accessible. They also have a high aesthetic appeal. Such facilities are an important attraction for tourists looking for a balanced cultural experience.

There are also small venues. For example, the Almaty Youth Theater. This theater received positive marks for its socially oriented performances.

Table 5 – Overview of Almaty’s ethnocultural attractions

Category	Name	Highlights
Museums	State Central Museum of Kazakhstan	Comprehensive exhibits on Kazakh history and nomadic culture
Museums	Museum of Folk Musical Instruments	Traditional Kazakh instruments and live music sessions
Theaters	Abai Kazakh State Academic Opera and Ballet Theatre	High accessibility (4.5/5) and aesthetic appeal (4.8/5)
Theaters	G. Musrepov State Academic Theatre for Children and Youth	Community-centered performances but lower infrastructure score (3.2/5)
Festivals	Spirit of Tengri Festival	Cultural authenticity (4.9/5) and visitor engagement (4.8/5)
Festivals	Nauryz Festival	Praised for authenticity but faces logistical challenges
Ethnovillages	Nomad Ethnovillage	Highest cultural authenticity score (4.9/5) and immersive experiences
Ethnovillages	Gunny Ethnovillage	Potential for growth but low accessibility score (3.0/5)
National Restaurants	Sandyk	Traditional Kazakh cuisine with aesthetic appeal (4.6/5)
National Restaurants	Shanyrak	High visitor satisfaction (4.5/5) but lacks multilingual menus

Note – Compiled by the authors.

Poor infrastructure development negatively affects the overall satisfaction of visitors. This situation needs to be improved through special investments. Then the competitiveness of small cultural facilities will increase.

Cultural events

The Spirit of Tengri festival and the Nauryz holiday are also always highly appreciated. These events have a high cultural authenticity. Visitors actively participate. Such festivals serve as a platform for cultural exchange. They demonstrate the nomadic traditions of Kazakhstan. At the same time, they introduce music and art. However, interviews and field observations revealed some difficulties. Organizational issues arise at large events. For example, there are too many people. Infrastructure is lacking. These situations indicate the need for good planning. Proper event management is important. Resources need to be allocated effectively. This will create a comfortable and safe environment for visitors.

Ethnovillages

The study also examined ethnovillages. The Nomad ethnovillage was especially highly rated. The level of authenticity here is high. The programs are aimed at deep cultural immersion. Tourists can see traditional Kazakh life with their own eyes. There is an opportunity to observe yurt making, ride horses, and watch the art of «kusbegilik».

Accessibility issues were also identified. The Gunny ethnovillage in particular received a low rating. Because the transport infrastructure here is poorly developed. It is important to eliminate these obstacles. Then the attractiveness of ethnovillages will increase. They will be able to reach more people as a unique ethnocultural object.

Ethnic restaurants

Ethnic restaurants also play an important role. Places like Sandyk and Shanyrak were highly rated. They serve traditional Kazakh cuisine. The interior design is beautiful, so they have a high aesthetic appeal. The overall level of visitor satisfaction is also good. Such facilities add a gastronomic dimension to Almaty’s ethnocultural tourism. However, there are some limitations. Multilingual menus are not enough. Language services are also not well developed. This reduces accessibility for foreign tourists. Therefore, it is important to introduce a multilingual menu. It is necessary to organize basic translation or language support services. Then the number of visitors will increase, and the tourist experience will significantly improve.

In general, the list confirmed the ethnocultural richness of Almaty. The city has great potential for tourism development. However, a number of persistent problems remain. There are gaps in the infrastructure. Organizational work is not always effective. International accessibility is also insufficient. Strategic investments in infrastructure are needed. It is also important to increase marketing activity. Cultural authenticity must be carefully maintained. Only then can Almaty strengthen its position as one of the leading destinations for ethnocultural tourism.

Field observations conducted at 10 sites supported the respondents' opinions with empirical data. In addition, these observations provided additional information about the qualitative aspects of the visitor experience (Figure 4).

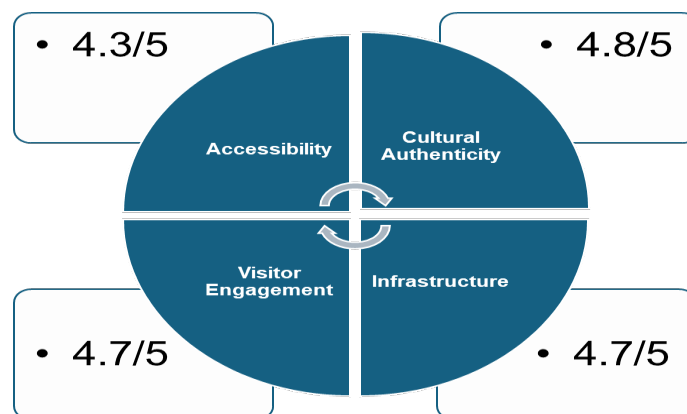


Figure 3 – Field Observation Results

Note – Compiled by the authors

Museums and theaters located in the city center received the highest average score for accessibility – 4.3/5. In contrast, ethnovillages in rural areas received the lowest score – 3.1/5. This is primarily due to poor road conditions and limited public transport.

Festivals and ethnovillages were rated particularly highly in terms of cultural authenticity: the average score reached 4.8/5. This clearly demonstrates their importance as one of the main means of conveying traditional practices and rituals.

Facilities offering interactive events recorded the highest levels of visitor engagement. For example, the Nomad ethnovillage and the Spirit of Tengri festival received an average score of 4.7/5.

City restaurants and theaters showed relatively high results in terms of infrastructure provision (average 4.5/5). In the areas where ethnovillages and open-air festivals are located, the infrastructure was found to be poorly developed; the average score for these facilities was 3.2/5. Such data indicate the need for significant modernization of infrastructure in these areas.

To provide a more structured and analytical interpretation of the findings, a SWOT analysis of ethnocultural tourism in Almaty was conducted (Table 6).

Table 6 – SWOT analysis of ethnocultural tourism sites in Almaty

Strengths	Weaknesses
High level of cultural authenticity Rich diversity of ethnocultural resources (museums, festivals, Ethnoauls, restaurants) Presence of well-established cultural attractions (e.g., Central State Museum, Spirit of Tengri festival) Strong potential for immersive and experience-based tourism Multicultural urban environment	Poor transport accessibility to ethnocultural sites (especially Ethnoauls) Underdeveloped infrastructure in rural and peri-urban areas Limited multilingual services and visitor support Weak international promotion and low global visibility Lack of coordination between tourism stakeholders
Opportunities	Threats
Growing global demand for authentic cultural experiences Expansion of experiential tourism (master classes, gastrotourism tours, cultural workshops) Development of digital marketing and online promotion tools Involvement of local communities in tourism development Potential for branding Almaty as a cultural tourism destination in Central Asia	Risk of over-commercialization and loss of authenticity Cultural degradation due to uncontrolled tourism development Strong competition from other cultural destinations Uneven development between urban and rural areas Loss of traditional practices if not properly preserved
Note – Compiled by the authors.	

The SWOT analysis highlights that while Almaty possesses strong cultural assets and significant development potential, several structural and operational challenges must be addressed to ensure sustainable growth of ethnocultural tourism.

DISCUSSION

The study applied a qualitative research design integrating resource inventory, expert interviews, and field observations. This methodological approach allowed for a comprehensive assessment of the ethnocultural tourism potential of Almaty, combining both expert perspectives and empirical observations of tourism facilities.

The findings demonstrate that Almaty possesses a diverse and structurally rich set of ethnocultural tourism resources, which were classified into five main categories: museums, theaters, festivals, ethnoauls, and national restaurants. Each of these categories contributes differently to the formation of the city's tourism product and reflects its multicultural identity.

Structuring results: systemic and local challenges.

In order to enhance the analytical clarity and scientific relevance of the results, the identified challenges can be grouped into two main categories: systemic and local.

Systemic challenges are those that require intervention at the governmental or policy level. These include insufficient transport infrastructure, particularly in rural and peri-urban areas, limited accessibility of ethnocultural sites, weak international promotion, and the absence of a unified branding strategy for ethnocultural tourism.

Local challenges, in contrast, can be addressed at the level of individual tourism enterprises and local communities. These include insufficient service quality, lack of multilingual communication, limited development of interactive tourism formats, and inadequate involvement of local residents in tourism activities.

Such differentiation allows for a clearer understanding of responsibility distribution and supports the development of targeted and effective policy and management solutions.

Interpretation of key findings

The results indicate that cultural authenticity plays a central role in shaping tourist experience and satisfaction. High scores recorded for authenticity-related indicators confirm that tourists are increasingly interested in immersive and meaningful cultural experiences. This finding is consistent with existing literature, which identifies authenticity as one of the key drivers of demand in cultural and ethnocultural tourism [20].

Museums and festivals, in particular, demonstrate strong potential as core elements of ethnocultural tourism in Almaty. Museums provide structured and accessible knowledge about national history and culture, while festivals create dynamic platforms for cultural exchange and visitor engagement.

At the same time, ethnoauls offer unique opportunities for experiential tourism based on direct interaction with traditional practices. However, their development is constrained by infrastructural limitations, particularly related to accessibility and service provision.

Infrastructure-related issues remain one of the most significant barriers to the development of ethnocultural tourism. The lack of basic tourism infrastructure and insufficient navigation systems significantly reduce the attractiveness of sites, particularly those located outside the urban area. These findings confirm previous research highlighting infrastructure limitations as a key barrier to tourism development. [21].

Another important issue is the insufficient use of digital marketing tools. In the context of increasing digitalization of tourism, the lack of comprehensive online promotion, multilingual content, and integrated digital strategies limits the international visibility of Almaty as an ethnocultural destination.

In addition, the study identifies the growing risk of commercialization of cultural practices. As demand for ethnocultural tourism increases, there is a tendency to simplify or stage traditions to meet tourist expectations. This may lead to a loss of authenticity and reduction in cultural value, highlighting the need for careful management and preservation strategies.

Development priorities and practical implications

Based on the results of the study, it is not practical to develop all ethnocultural tourism segments simultaneously. Therefore, priority directions should be identified.

Museums can be considered as the foundational element of ethnocultural tourism development, due to their accessibility and ability to provide structured cultural interpretation.

Festivals serve as an important tool for promotion and can significantly enhance the visibility of Almaty in both domestic and international markets.

Ethnoaulls represent a promising direction of development, particularly in the context of experiential and sustainable tourism; however, their expansion requires targeted infrastructure investment.

National restaurants and theaters contribute to the diversification of the tourism product and enhance the overall visitor experience, supporting the development of a integrated tourism product.

Implications for stakeholders

The implementation of development strategies requires coordinated action among different stakeholders.

Government institutions should focus on addressing systemic challenges, including infrastructure development, policy support, and destination branding.

Tourism businesses should prioritize service quality improvement, development of interactive tourism products, and customer-oriented approaches.

Local communities should be actively involved in tourism development, as their participation is essential for preserving cultural authenticity and ensuring sustainable development outcomes.

Contribution and limitations

This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by providing a structured and context-specific analysis of ethnocultural tourism development in Almaty. It offers practical insights that can support decision-making at both policy and operational levels.

However, several limitations should be acknowledged. The relatively small sample size of respondents may limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the focus on a single urban context may not fully reflect the diversity of ethnocultural tourism development across different regions of Kazakhstan.

CONCLUSION

The study showed that Almaty has great potential for the development of ethnocultural tourism. The main objects have high cultural authenticity. The level of visitor participation is also high. The leading objects are the Central State Museum, the Museum of Folk Musical Instruments, the Nomad ethnovillage, the Spirit of Tengri and festivals such as Nauryz. These objects vividly demonstrate the nomadic heritage and cultural diversity.

At the same time, a number of problems were identified. Infrastructure in rural and peri-urban areas is weak. Road quality is poor. Service facilities are insufficient. Digital marketing is also not fully used. There is little multilingual content. International recognition is low. There is also a risk of commercialization. In some cases, traditions can be adapted to tourists and authenticity can weaken. Nevertheless, the development potential is clear. Tourists are more interested in deep and interactive experiences. Ethnovillage programs, participation in festivals, thematic tours can be in demand. If the right strategy is adopted, Almaty can become one of the leading ethnocultural destinations in Central Asia.

Practical recommendations include targeted investments in infrastructure, expansion of digital marketing activities, and the development of immersive interactive technologies that attract modern travelers. Cooperation between local communities, government agencies, and tour operators is essential to ensure that tourism development benefits all stakeholders while preserving the cultural integrity of the region. Ensuring sustainable tourism management and educational programs for tourists and locals is essential to achieve this balance.

Looking ahead, we can say that further research will allow us to study the long-term economic and social consequences of ethno-cultural tourism in Almaty, as well as the effectiveness of the proposed strategy. Adding quantitative metrics to assess visitor satisfaction and economic returns can provide a deeper understanding of the industry's growth potential. By solving these tasks and implementing the proposed strategy, Almaty can establish itself as the main center of cultural tourism in Central Asia, preserve its unique heritage for future generations and attract domestic and foreign tourists.

In short, ethno-cultural tourism provides Almaty with a unique opportunity to express its individuality, promote intercultural understanding and sustainable economic development. Through strategic planning and joint efforts, the city can become a model of cultural tourism that benefits both tourists and local communities.

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АЛМАТЫНЫҢ ЭТНОМӘДЕНИ ТУРИСТІК ӘЛЕУЕТІ: СЫН-ҚАТЕРЛЕР, МҮМКІНДІКТЕР ЖӘНЕ ДАМУ СТРАТЕГИЯЛАРЫ

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АНДАТПА

Зерттеудің мақсаты – Бұл зерттеу Алматы қаласының этномәдени туризм әлеуетін талдауға, оның негізгі артықшылықтары мен даму барысында туындайтын өзекті мәселелерді айқындауға, сондай-ақ алдағы кезеңдегі даму мүмкіндіктерін анықтауға бағытталған.

Ғылыми-зерттеу жұмысының негізгі проблемасы – Зерттеу барысында Алматы қаласында этномәдени туризмнің дамуын шектейтін бірқатар факторлар анықталды. Олардың қатарына туристік инфрақұрылымның жеткіліксіздігі, халықаралық туристік нарықта қаланың әлсіз ілгерілетілуі және мәдени құндылықтардың шамадан тыс коммерциялану қаупі жатады.

Әдіснамасы – Зерттеуде аралас әдіс қолданылды. Зерттеушілер туризм саласының мамандарымен сұхбат жүргізді. Далалық бақылаулар жүргізілді. Қаладағы негізгі этномәдени нысандардың тізімі жасалып сонымен қатар соңғы бес жылдықтағы Алматыға келген туристер саны бойынша статистикалық талдаумен қоса этно-мәдени нысандар бойынша Google Reviews деректері сапалық талдау әдісі арқылы өңделіп, келушілердің тәжірибесін бағалау мақсатында қолданылды.

Зерттеудің бірегейлігі / құндылығы – Алматы қаласының этномәдени туризм әлеуетін кешенді сапалық тұрғыда зерделеуімен айқындалады.

Зерттеу нәтижелері – Алынған нәтижелер этномәдени туризмді дамыту мақсатында инфрақұрылымды жетілдіру, цифрлық және халықаралық маркетинг құралдарын кеңінен қолдану, туристер үшін мәдени-танымдық интерактивті тәжірибелерді дамыту, жергілікті қауымдастықтардың қатысуын күшейту және ірі этномәдени фестивальдерді кең ауқымда ұйымдастыру қажеттігін көрсетеді.

Түйінді сөздер: этномәдени туризм; Алматы; мәдени мұра; тұрақты туризм; Орталық Азия

Алғыс. Бұл зерттеуді Қазақстан Республикасы Ғылым және жоғары білім министрлігінің Ғылым комитеті AP26103653 Іле-Алатау саябағында овертуризмді алдын алу үшін ұшқышсыз ұшу аппараттары мен ГАЗ және жасанды интеллект құралдарын пайдалана отырып, рекреациялық сыйымдылықты модельдеу гранты бойынша қаржыландырды.

ЭТНОКУЛЬТУРНЫЙ ТУРИСТСКИЙ ПОТЕНЦИАЛ АЛМАТЫ: ВЫЗОВЫ, ВОЗМОЖНОСТИ И СТРАТЕГИИ УСТОЙЧИВОГО РАЗВИТИЯ

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АННОТАЦИЯ

Цель исследования – Данное исследование направлено на обсуждение потенциала города Алматы в области этнокультурного туризма, выявление его основных преимуществ и актуальных проблем, возникающих в ходе развития, а также выявление возможностей развития на предстоящий период.

Основная проблема – В ходе исследования был выявлен ряд факторов, ограничивающих развитие этнокультурного туризма в городе Алматы. К ним относятся недостаточная туристская инфраструктура, слабое развитие города на Международном туристском рынке и угроза чрезмерной коммерциализации культурных ценностей.

Методология – В исследовании использовался смешанный метод. Исследователи опросили специалистов туристической индустрии. Были проведены полевые наблюдения. Был составлен список основных этнокультурных объектов города, а данные Google Reviews об этих объектах, наряду со статистическим анализом количества туристов, посетивших Алматы за последние пять лет, были обработаны с использованием качественного метода анализа и использованы для оценки впечатлений посетителей.

Уникальность/ценность исследования – Комплексно качественно определяется потенциал этнокультурного туризма города Алматы.

Результаты исследования. Полученные результаты свидетельствуют о необходимости совершенствования инфраструктуры в целях развития этнокультурного туризма, широкого применения инструментов цифрового и международного маркетинга, развития культурно-познавательных интерактивных практик для туристов, усиления участия местных сообществ и масштабной организации крупных этнокультурных фести-вальдеров.

Ключевые слова: этнокультурный туризм; Алматы; культурное наследие; устойчивый туризм; Центральная Азия

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