

TOWARDS FRUITFUL COOPERATION IN TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN NORTHEAST ASIA

Alexander NIKULIN

*Chairman, Interregional Association of Independent Tour Operators of the
Russian Far East (IAIAITO)
General Director, InterRegioTour Noncommercial Education Partnership,
Director of Far East Branch, Russian International Academy of Tourism*

COMMENTS

Convenient geographical location of the Northeast Asia countries, availability of developed transport infrastructure, as well as their immediate proximity to each other allow the active development of trade, economic, scientific, cultural, and tourism relations.

Tourism and hospitality industry as a perspective sector in economy of many countries, acts as a kind of accelerant for their social and economic development. Development of tourism industry promotes satisfaction of the population needs, makes a positive impact on changing the area's image, promotes interregional and international relations, revival of business activity, has an incentive influence on key sectors of economy, such as transport, communications, construction, hotel facilities, trade, production of consumer goods, and others.

Northeast Asia as a whole can be considered as most stably developing region and as one of the safest regions in today's world. Another important detail is that the region is ecologically stable, and that it managed to preserve the unique natural environment, its wildlife and flora, which is of paramount importance for nature-based and ecological tourism. All this makes the Northeast Asia region one of the world's most perspective travel destinations and sets us a task for expending cooperation in common tourism development in the region.

Owing to its favorable geographical location and availability of convenient transportation routes, the Far East of Russia acquires in the last years the increasing significance for Russia as the important travel destination in development of good-neighborhood and economic relations with the Northeast Asia. Direct air communication connects the East of Russia to Japan, Korea, China and other countries. The four regions of the area are connected by the Trans-Siberian Railway, and almost all of the Russian Far East's regions have an access to the sea. All this gives the Russian Far East ample opportunities for arrangement of travel by rail, sea cruises, and

combined tours covering several of the Far East regions and the Northeast Asia countries, as well as serving as a strong point for a transit travel of tourists from Northeast Asia.

Special significance for development of inbound international tourism in the Far East of Russia lies in its natural potential. With its unique natural resources, the Far East has great opportunities for development of the now most perspective trend of tourism - international ecological tourism. The Far East territory is unique in combination of vegetation and wildlife species. Probably, there is no other place on the globe where so many representatives of northern flora and fauna adjoin to species typical for southern latitudes. The unique natural complexes of protected natural areas can become a substantial part of ecological tourism.

The Russian Far East has more than 20 reserves, plenty of natural sanctuaries, historical and cultural monuments. Among them are the unique sites: the Valley of Geysers in Kamchatka, hot springs in the Kurile Isles, a relic yew grove in Primorski Territory, ancient rock drawings of the 6-th century at Sikachi Alyan in Khabarovsk Territory, and many others. And, at last, the Russian Far East is simply a big variety of natural landscapes – from tundra to southern taiga forests, from interior mountain areas to coastal zones.

Generally recognized and popular with foreign tourists are cruises along the river Amur and sea cruises to the Kuriles, sport fishing trips, rafting down mountain rivers, ethnographic tours, adventure itineraries, scientific, educational, and ecological tour, and excursions to nature reserves. In our opinion, there is a good outlook for complex interregional tours over the Russian Far East Russia, travel on the Trans-Siberian Railway, itineraries to the Shantar Archipelago, cruises along the sea coast of the Khabarovsk and Primorski territories, archeological tours, bird watching expeditions, the tours combining Chukotka and Alaska, southern areas of the Russian Far East and northern provinces of China and Korea.

The area of the modern Far East of Russia is the historical home land for the small peoples – evenks, evens, yakuts, chukchis, koryaks, udegheis, nanaians, orochis, nivkhs, ulchis, and many other which developed as a result of centuries-old interaction of the forced migrants with the indigenous inhabitants. All of them have a rich centuries-old history and ancient original culture, for the most part saved up to now. Cult ceremonies, national celebrations, festivals and the other events held in national communities, always attract many people, local residents and visitors. All this generates keen interest with foreign tourists too and allows developing of ethnic tourism.

In the last six years, the sales in tourism in the Far East of Russia have increased 4 times, with tax proceeds to budgets of different levels increasing almost 20 times. This means that the tourism enterprises of Russia become more and more lawful and open. In 2003, the total sales in tourism in the Russian Far East and Transbaikalia 877 million rubles, with tax proceeds to budgets of all levels making 246 million rubles.

The leader in tourism sales in 2003 was Primorski Territory whose share in total volume of the region's tourism made 23 % (200 million rbl.). Significant rates were shown by Chita Region - 21 % (180 million rbl.), Khabarovsk Territory - 19 % (170.97 million rbl.), Kamchatka Region - 15 % (135 million rbl.).

At the same time, the leading place in tax proceeds of tourism industry to budgets of all levels is occupied by Khabarovsk Territory – 101.7 million rbl. (35 %).

The number of tourism companies in 2003 has reached 763, with the number of employed people making about 7 thousand.

Analyzing shares of various kinds of tourist activities in the total volume of tourism in the East of Russia in 2003, it should be noted that the greatest share of 70 % belongs to outbound tourism. This situation is characteristic for the tourism industry of the whole country. However, according to the Concept of Tourism Development in the Russian Federation, priority is given to development of inbound tourism in Russia.

As a matter of fact, located in the center of the Northeast Asia region, the Russian Far East Russia can become a connecting link in promotion of economic relations and tourism development in the region. I fully support the proposal of Mr. Li Zhuyuan to establish the Northeast Asia tourism ring. True, this will require from the region's countries great efforts in improvement of tourism infrastructure, coordination of tourist programs, perfection of visa policies. In any event, establishment of a tourism ring, as well as tourism development in the Northeast Asia region will require coordination of efforts of all concerned governmental departments and public organizations in tourism. For this purpose, it is necessary to set up a certain multilateral structure, a coordinating body of uniting all countries of the region, as it has been suggested by Mr. Sekiyama and Mr. Li Zhuyuan. This could be both a standing body, and a working group or committee, at the level of governments, or a non-governmental agency, or a public association.

We meet at various tourism forums and exhibitions, we participate together in scientific and practical conferences, and we have significant experience of cooperation on tourism development between our countries on a bilateral level, in the framework of intergovernmental committees and working groups.

However, development of interregional relations and tourism demand, the need to coordinate activities of various regional, intergovernmental, interregional, non-governmental structures in tourism, dictate the necessity of establishment of a multilateral coordinating body representing all countries and regions of Northeast Asia.

The most important and first-priority task for this coordinating body should become working out of the Northeast Asia tourism development Concept based on scientific research and taking into account interests of all countries of the region. I believe, that the key activities in tourism development should be:

- account for the world tendencies in tourism;
- creation of legal and economic conditions for tourism development;
- creation of favorable image of the region;
- development of an original tour product;

- competent marketing;
- improvement of tourism infrastructure,
- investment projects.

The concept, as program of joint actions on tourism development, should outline concrete steps for specific task solutions. Let me dwell on some of them.

1. Perfection of visa policy in the region

The frontier tourism is characterized by a high share of short-term tours and excursions (one-day) tourism. High mobility of tourist flows in frontier tourism areas makes visa problems especially acute. A certain progress in this question begins to show on a bilateral level.

After Russia was put on the list of countries recommended for visit by Chinese people, new prospects for cooperation of the two states have opened in the field of tourism. The first agreement on a visa-free tourists exchange was signed by our countries in 1992. Today, about 500 thousand people come from China to Russia every year on a visa-free exchange basis, with 800 thousand of Russians going to China without visas. This program of visa-free exchange is not perfect, and many problems need their solution with this regard, but still it is a big step in tourism development between the two countries.

In the beginning of 2003, with the purposes of attracting Russian tourists to their country, the Japanese side made some changes in the procedure of entry visa processing for citizens of Russia, including reduction of processing term for Tourism Visa down to three days, as well as abolition of consular fees. Also, an experiment of short-term visas issuance for the period of 72 hours for the passengers of the Hokkaido - Sakhalin ferry (Wakkanai - Korsakov) is now on the way.

I believe that it is necessary to consider a possibility of spreading the short-term visas experiment to other regions, as well as to consider the question of concluding additional agreements on visa-free tourist groups travel between governments of Northeast Asia countries.

2. Development of tourism infrastructure

We know, that tourism infrastructure in the Northeast Asia region is not evenly developed. It is well advanced in some countries, with network of high class hotels, tourist centers, entertaining complexes, equipped sites and attractions, and it only starts to develop in other countries by virtue of objective reasons. I see two ways of solving this problem. First is attracting investments from the more advanced countries. Second is the development of such types of tourism which do not require developed infrastructure and sometimes even benefit from its absence. They are ecological tourism and nature-based types of tourism, as well as sea cruises. Cruising tourism in the region practically does not develop, although in fact almost all Northeast Asia countries have

an access to the sea. We consider this type of tourism to be one of the most perspective and the one that will help to smooth for a start the unevenness of infrastructure development in countries of the region.

It is very important that this type of tourism allows us to solve many problems: to visit several regions in one trip, to visit the most reserved and remote places, to solve the problem of comfortable accommodation and meals for tourists, to take the heavy duties off hotels and other means of transport. Not less important is that according to existing practice passengers of cruise vessels are allowed to land for less than 72 hours without visas, for example in the Russian Federation, in case they are staying aboard a cruise ship.

Again, the implementation of the idea of the Northeast Asia tourism ring could also start with sea cruises.

3. Joint programs and projects

The problem consists in development of an original tour product which would promote the region's favorable image, attract tourists from both Northeast Asia countries and other regions of the world. The cruise lines I mentioned above, could, for example, originate in Japan, cover the Kurile Islands, then Kamchatka, the Shantar Islands, run further along the sea coast of Khabarovsk and Primorski territories, then visit Korea and finally arrive in a port of China.

Another perspective project is arrangement of a cruise line along the ancient trade way of Santan (the Northeast line of the Great Silk Way) which was explored in due course by the known Japanese traveler and map-maker Mamiya Rinzo and existence of which has been presently proved by the modern Japanese ethnographer, professor of the Osaka Ethnology Museum - Kazuyoshi Otsuka.

Besides cruise lines and the tourism ring, we need development of other travel itineraries designed for various categories of tourists and combining tourism opportunities of the region's countries. Implementation of joint tourism programs would also require creation of joint ventures and organizations which could acquire and maintain cruise ships and arrange ground service.

This kind of work could be done within the existing tourism associations or within a newly established association of the Northeast Asia tour operators.

4. Investment program

In tourism development in Northeast Asia there is a big field of action for investors. Investment in tourism industry means, first of all, construction of hotels, tourist centers and cruise vessels, which is beneficial and perspective. Creation of favorable condition for attraction of investments in tourism and development of effective investments protection measures is necessary.

There are many other problems to be solved for development of tourism the Northeast Asia region. These include joint exhibition activities, tourism students exchange programs and training qualified tourism staff, and many other things. On behalf of the tour operators of the Russian Far East, I support the speakers' proposal to establish a multilateral structure for coordination of tourism development in Northeast Asia and suggest forming a working group for setting up of such structure.