Kazakhstan’s secret city sets sights on becoming seaside resort

AFP- From the roof of his abandoned hotel, Alexei Vereshchagin remained certain that tourists would one day sip cocktails up there as they enjoyed the lakeside view of Priozersk – a former secret city in central Kazakhstan.
Due to a lack of investment, Vereshchagin has been renovating the hotel alone – including putting in new windows in each of the 150 rooms, one by one.

This mammoth task is likely to take years.

The hotel’s former Cyrillic-lettered sign saying “Hotel Russia” has been removed and is now gathering dust on the roof alongside a rusty portrait of Vladimir Lenin.

“I want there to be a beautiful hotel in the centre of the city, like in the Soviet era. So I am restoring it, little by little,” recounted Vereshchagin, a Soviet Army veteran.

Once the hotel is renovated, ordinary tourists will be able to stay near Lake Balkhash’s shores with its “magnificent views”, Vereshchagin said.

The development of a thriving tourism sector in Priozersk would mark a dramatic change of fortune for the once-closed city, long unmarked on maps because of secretive military sites.

The Sary-Shagan missile range was built in 1956 to test anti-ballistic weapons systems, and a portion of the range is still leased by the Russian government, Priozersk’s mayor Mansur Akhmetov told AFP.

Walking around the town of 15,000, reminders of its Cold War

heyday are everywhere.

Replicas of the S-75 surface-to-air missiles tested in Priozersk have been placed in the city centre and at its entrance, along with fading posters praising the “glory of the anti-missile shield of the Fatherland”.

– Beaches and bases –

Several sites dotted across the sprawling testing range on an arid steppe have been abandoned, and are now guarded by the likes of resident Ivan Sabitov.

Sabitov, a Kazakh civilian, now whiles away the time watching over empty missile silos, dismantled radars and rocket fairings with his dog.

“These Soviet installations are destroyed, but other bases are still active,” said the 61-year-old with a weathered face.

Russian troops from the Strategic Missile Forces – which helps manage the Kremlin’s nuclear arsenal – are still stationed in the area and sometimes swim in Lake Balkhash in the evening with their families.

Russia claims to have “infrastructure developed around Priozersk to test strategic defence equipment”, including intercontinental ballistic missiles.

Despite the presence of Russian bases, Priozersk’s mayor is trying to transform the city into a seaside resort.

This project is in line with President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev’s desire to develop the country’s tourism sector, which represents just 3.2 percent of its GDP.

“We are going to redevelop the entire coastline, so that pedestrians can walk along it. We also plan to build hotels and organise efforts to clean the beaches,” said Akhmetov of his ambitious plans.

– Budding tourism –

Priozersk is already home to a smattering of small hotels that mostly host fishermen and a trickle of tourists during the first days of summer.

“Even if the town seems partly abandoned, Lake Balkhash is magnificent. I enjoy the warm water and the sand on the beach,” said Olga Ryapolova, a Russian tourist from Siberia who “hopes to come back” to Priozersk soon.

Upon closer inspection, the picturesque lake contrasts with the desolation elsewhere.

A disused cement factory still stands near the lake’s shores, which Mayor Akhmetov hopes to one day demolish.

But on the only road leading to the end of the peninsula, stands a new hotel: “The Golden Sands”. This four-star spa was built in 2016 and has become a welcome source of jobs, with its 120 employees.

“In Priozersk, jobs are scarce, and mainly linked to the army. My mother is a soldier, I was a police officer,” said the spa’s receptionist Aizhan Musina.

“But my salary (around 250 euros) was too small, so I came to work here,” Musina said, adding that she now makes roughly 370 euros ($400) a month.

Musina was born in Priozersk when the city was still sealed off from the public. She has long been waiting for her hometown to open up to tourists.

“I hope that our city will gain fame, and that people will know that we have such a beautiful spa,” Musina told AFP.

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