



Conclusions and Minutes 4th UNWTO Silk Road Task Force Meeting

Radisson Blu Iveria Hotel, Tbilisi, Georgia
7-8 July 2014

On 7-8 July 2014, the 4th UNWTO Silk Road Task Force Meeting took place in Tbilisi, Georgia, organised by UNWTO and the Georgian National Tourism Administration. The Meeting was held in conjunction with the first edition of Routes Silk Road, an aviation industry event organised by Routes Online (UBM) and the United Airports of Georgia.

The UNWTO Silk Road Task Force, made up of representatives from Member States, UNESCO, World Federation Tourist Guides Association (WFTGA) and other key stakeholders, plays a decisive role in determining key strategies, driving project implementation and exchanging best practices. With 17 countries represented, this 4th Meeting of the Silk Road Task Force was the largest yet. At the Meeting, the new UNWTO Silk Road Action Plan 2014/2015 was launched, and participants set out the priorities and concrete activities for the coming year. All countries actively contributed to the sharing of ideas and experiences as to how to promote the sustainable development of Silk Road tourism.

Initiatives and priorities devised by the Task Force for 2014/2015 included:

- Increase promotion of Silk Road tourism online through individual destination websites, search engine optimisation and UNWTO channels (twitter, facebook, flickr, vimeo, etc)
- Increase collaboration between Silk Road Member States and work more closely with neighbouring countries
- Maintain commitment to improving visa policies and aviation growth across the regions
- Work more closely with travel trade to promote the Silk Road and to package product
- Take collaborative approach to promoting the Silk Road at major travel fairs
- Develop a brand story for the Silk Road
- Engage with educational institutions to promote knowledge of the Silk Road
- Develop thematic products to promote the Silk Road (food, heritage, culture, etc)
- Explore the possibility of hosting a rotating annual Silk Road festival or have a Silk Road capital city

Workshop discussion summaries

The key objectives of this meeting were to strengthen the role of the Silk Road Task Force and to address the priorities and strategies for the Silk Road Action Plan 2014/2015. This gathering of Task Force members from across the Silk Road was designed to provide Member States with the opportunity to give direct input into the Programme and contribute to the achievement of tangible and feasible results.

The Silk Road Programme is focused on three key areas of activity and these were the focus for each session:

- i. Marketing and Promotion
- ii. Capacity Building and Destination Management
- iii. Travel Facilitation

Workshop on Focus Area I: Marketing and Promotion

The participants were asked to provide their input on the following:

- How can the Silk Road brand present new marketing opportunities for destinations?
- How can Silk Road countries better implement cooperative marketing opportunities with neighbouring countries and destinations?
- What are the key marketing and promotion initiatives that Silk Road Member States would like to see launched in 2014/2015?

UNWTO commenced the session requesting that the participants share their marketing and promotion interests and objectives in participating in the Task Force Meeting, which included:

- Gain an opportunity to work with Member States on route development
- Stimulate new ideas and work towards a Silk Road visa
- Address the lack of consumer awareness of the Silk Road
- Promote the development of the Maritime Silk Road
- Become more active in the Silk Road and work more closely with neighbouring countries
- Focus on cluster development as a means of piecing together the Silk Road
- Join efforts for Silk Road development with the travel trade
- Look at how the Silk Road can be established as a competitive brand to attract major events
- Create better visibility of the Silk Road on social media and improve Search Engine Optimisation (SEO)
- Focus on creating a website that covers all aspects of Silk Road travel including heritage and culture
- Implement joint promotion of the Silk Road at major travel exhibitions
- Enhance collaboration with private sector and travel trade
- Optimize marketing opportunities following the World Heritage inscription of the Silk Road heritage corridors
- Improve interpretation of heritage through, through initiatives such as 'train the trainers' tourist guide workshops
- Promote MICE industry development on the Silk Road
- Develop a brand story for the Silk Road to connect destinations

In this session, Iraq raised its concern regarding the smuggling of antiquities. Iraq urged UNESCO, UNWTO Member States and the global community to take measures towards ensuring that all stolen antiquities are returned to Iraq.

Workshop on Focus Area II: Capacity Building and Destination Management

The participants were asked to consider the following:

- What are the current priorities for capacity building in destinations along the Silk Road?
- How can National Tourism Administrations collaborate more effectively to foster sustainable tourism development?

UNESCO Update on UNESCO Silk Road Heritage Corridors Inscription on World Heritage List (Delivered by Mr Peter DeBrine, Senior Project Officer, Sustainable Tourism)

The thematic study and analysis on approximately 50 Heritage Corridors was carried out over last 10 years. The thematic study will be launched shortly and UNESCO encourages the Task Force to make use of this research, as sites within each country have been identified. There were two heritage corridors where the countries came together to develop a nomination for World Heritage. The China- Kazakhstan- Kyrgyzstan (Chang'an-Tianshan Corridor) was inscribed in Doha at the last World Heritage Committee meeting in June 2014, which was a very positive development for the Silk Road. The other corridor crossing Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan was deferred back to the State Parties for more information, hopefully to be inscribed at the next meeting of the World Heritage Committee in 2015.

The World Heritage nominations take an incredible amount of time and effort to develop and the achievements of these countries over the last few years is indicative of the ability of countries to work together. The Cultural Ministries are still actively involved in the process beyond the inscription of sites and capacity development is going to be a key feature going forward.

UNESCO together with UNWTO has since embarked on developing a strategy designed to bring together tourism and heritage stakeholders for developing sustainable tourism along the Silk Road Heritage Corridors. A very successful workshop was held in Almaty in October last year, organized by UNWTO, UNESCO and the Ministry of Industry and New Technologies of the Republic of Kazakhstan, with the support of the UNESCO/Netherlands Funds-in-Trust. The workshop defined a roadmap for the way forward and priorities for the immediate future. The priorities defined in this roadmap are applicable to all countries across the Silk Road. A lot of progress has been made but what needs to be done now is broaden out the initiative towards all the participating countries.

The Silk Road inscription received a lot of press, particularly in China. China is a good example of a country promoting World Heritage very intensively. This inscription presents significant opportunities for marketing and promotion, as well as capacity building, particularly on interpretation for these sites to create a quality tourism product. UNESCO and UNWTO are developing a train the trainers programme to help raise the standards of guiding around the Silk Road Heritage Corridors.

Update from World Federation Tourist Guides Association (WFTGA) on Silk Road Training Programme (Delivered by Ms. Wilja Siebe, Vice President)

WFTGA was founded 30 years ago and is represented in 80 countries with 200,000 members worldwide. WFTGA's expertise is in tourist guiding and tourist guide training. WFTGA is pleased that the pilot project for the Silk Road will be taking place in Kazakhstan in collaboration with UNESCO and UNWTO. The training will be run in two parts, the first part will be the hands-on guiding which runs for 7 days and the second part is the train the trainer part (5 days) – for those trainers who pass the first part of the training process. The Train the Trainer Course is for those who have 1) successfully passed the Hands on Guiding Course and 2) for those Tourist Guides who have at least one year experience in tourist guiding. There will be an English speaking and Russian speaking training group. The objective is to use this pilot project to learn on what can be improved for these specific training courses along the Silk Road in the future in each country.

Part of the training is practical skills – meaning people will be trained and assessed on the jobs as tourist guides and interpreters. This is the Part I Hands on Guiding Course whereas Part II is for those to be assessed to become a National Trainer in their own country. The other part is based on applied knowledge to be decided by WFTGA where some topics are compulsory like Groups Psychology, Cultural Diversity and Awareness and topics to be decided by mutual agreement between WFTGA/UNWTO and UNESCO for what is relevant for each country (Cultural Heritage Sites).

WFTGA has already carried out training sessions in Silk Road countries Georgia, Iran, Ukraine and Armenia and Azerbaijan. A good trained team of tourist guides is most important for the visitor experience, product interpretation and for leaving a strong and positive impression about the destination.

Results of Group Work

Following the interventions by UNESCO and WFTGA; delegates were split into groups of 4-5 delegates and were asked to work together to prepare their response to the following challenge:

- 1. Identify your biggest challenge or barrier to tourism development on Silk Road (not visa related)**
- 2. Propose multinational steps/strategy to overcome this challenge**

Each group then presented their response:

Group 1:

Members:

Ms. Elena Shlineva (Russia), Mr. Igor Melnyk (Ukraine), Ms. Svatlana Dichtjar (Affiliate Member, Hotel Business and Tourism Institute PFUR), Mr. Gahryman Yunusov (Turkmenistan)

Challenge: Lack of single concept, vision of Silk Road

Strategy:

- Creation of portal (with a commercial element), tour map, model your own route along Silk Road, refer to resources, tour operators.
- Register sites and monuments listing of Silk Road (with the support of the governments)
- United quality standards along Silk Road -should be minimal at the outset
- Within the framework of Silk Road, create a structure for Silk Road universities, to cover scientific, historic elements

Group 2:

Members:

Mr. Enton Diamanti (Albania), Ms. Mejvis Kola (Albania), Mr. Vladimir Bakić (Croatia), Mr. Mahmood Abduljabbar Mousa (Iraq), Mr. Mohammed Dahham Taha (Iraq), Mr. Tornike Zirakishvili (Georgia)

Challenge:

Promotion of Silk Road

Strategy:

- Silk Road Task Force to choose a city as Silk Road tourism capital, to rotate each year and feature a festival programme
- Silk Road to be better promoted by Member States, through joint guidebooks and festivals (as suggested by other groups)
- Silk Road to promote pilgrimage through Naazeriya (South Iraq), and further Silk Road religious tourism development
- Develop joint programme for training/capacity building/best practices
- Extend WFTGA training initiative in other countries
- Develop standards, legislation for tourism (particularly hotels, tourist guides, etc)

- Run an initiative to prevent trafficking of antiquities and destruction of heritage, and safeguarding of intangible heritage
- Better promotion and branding of Silk Road in major universities, institutions, hotels, etc.

Group 3:

Members:

Ms. Daniela Martellucci (Italy), Ms. Sungae Jung (Republic of Korea), Ms. Fatimah Hussein Mawla (Iraq), Mr. Mohammed Ajmal Gondal (Pakistan)

Challenge:

Promotion of the Silk Road

Strategy:

- Need to develop a central website for Silk Road countries, focusing on background and story of Silk Road, and providing links to individual countries
- Need for Silk Road logo to be promoted by each country, to represent vision and quality standards
- One pager on value of tourism and one pager on tourist to be distributed and taught at elementary level

Group 4:

Members:

Mr. Ali Bagher Nemati Zargaran (Iran), Mr. Akhtaruz Zaman Kabir (Bangladesh), Ms. Başak Önsal Demir (Turkey), Mr. Javid Abdullayev (Azerbaijan), Ms. Rusudan Mamatsashvili (Georgia)

Challenge:

How to consider Silk Road as a product?

Strategy:

- Need to work together, exchange experiences, develop a network
- More frequent interactive communications, need to use social media
- Task Force to develop network, can be operational on the internet, tour ops and SMEs to be involved. The network would develop joint products and packages which could involve visa regime
- Develop thematic products for the Silk Road, eg. 'tastes of Silk Road', 'lakes of Silk Road', etc.
- Silk Road Network can overcome lack of awareness of tourism and knowledge of local stakeholders

Group 5:

Members:

Ms. Samar Hussein Mohamed Ramadan (Egypt), Mr. Ali Yaseen Abudalredha Al-Saady (Iraq), Ms. Zhanat Kazkenova (Kazakhstan)

Challenge:

Lack of promotion, lack of investment in tourism sector, lack of cooperation between public and private stakeholders, lack of common standards for provision of services (common principles),

Strategy:

- Establishing a Silk Road federation like that of the EU countries
- Develop a united website of Silk Road countries to include culture, heritage
- Develop an association of tour operators of Silk Road
- Publishing electronic book about Silk Road, Egypt has done this recently which provides full information about the Silk Road
- Establish an exhibition promoting Silk Road countries to be hosted by a Silk Road country annually
- Create a Silk Road TV channel
- Every country's national plan of events for developing tourism should include Silk Road

Workshop on Focus Area III: Travel Facilitation

The participants were asked to consider the following:

- Research shows that Silk Road countries are improving their visa policies, but are they doing enough from a collaborative perspective to open up the borders for travel in the long term?
- How can Silk Road destinations cooperate better to enhance route development in 2014/2015? When will we see low cost carriers connecting the Silk Road?

Each country was requested to provide an update on travel facilitation policies and developments. The transcript from this session is outlined below.

Introduction

According to UNWTO Tourism Visa Openness Report for the Silk Road Countries (2014), 73% of the world's population needs a visa to enter the Silk Road countries. This however is down from 87% in just 5 years. This is good news for the Silk Road and evidence that the situation is improving.

Albania

Albania faces many challenges related to air services. There are currently no low cost carriers operating in Tirana, due to the high charges imposed by the airport which is managed by a Canadian consortium. There is no second international airport and therefore only major airlines operate and therefore the costs to travel to Albania by air are high. To get around this, Albania has been working in collaboration with Thomas Cook to promote visitation to Albania via Corfu Airport. As a result, around 1,000 Swedish tourists came to Albania this year for 8-10 night stays in the south of Albania. These Swedish tourists are flying to Corfu airport, then arriving in Albania by boat, organized by Thomas Cook. Training courses were implemented prior to the arrival of the Swedish visitors.

Lack of infrastructure is the main challenge for developing tourism in Albania. Transportation infrastructure and national roads are not in good condition, there are no motorways and the many mountains make driving potentially challenging.

Albania has made moves towards visa liberalization, and now has established a 6 month visa free period for countries such as China, Russia and Saudi Arabia. Schengen passport holders are free to enter Albania.

Iraq

Iraq has been passing through special circumstances since 2003.

Iraq works with a number of tour operators to process visas for groups within 2 weeks.

The One Window system combining security, tourism and ministry of foreign affairs has been introduced to facilitate visas more efficiently within 3 days. Visas on arrival are now available for Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Lebanon passport holders.

4,000 Iranians are entering Iraq every day for the motivation of pilgrimage. These Iranians can obtain a visa from the Iraqi Embassy in Tehran.

Iraq nationals have visited Georgia in high numbers in the past; however now there are more restrictions on Iraqi travel to Georgia. Iraq requested that they enter talks with Georgia about facilitating entry for Iraqi nationals.

Iraq thanked UNWTO for its support in facilitating visas for Iraqi participation in WTM London and ITB Berlin.

Iraq reiterated that concrete steps need to be taken to facilitate visas along the Silk Road and that Ministry of Interior or Foreign Affairs should be invited along with Ministries of Tourism to attend such meetings on visas.

Georgia responded that it has no visa policy with Iraq, but sometimes the border police reject entry for Iraqi visitors because they cannot answer certain questions. GNTA said they would be pleased to organise a meeting with Federal Policy and Ministry of Foreign Affairs to facilitate entry for Iraqi nationals to Georgia.

Ukraine

Ukraine has made a unilateral cancellation of visas for EU citizens.

Ukraine is working towards the liberalization of the visa policy, started on 2005 with unilateral free entry for citizens of the EU, USA and Canada.

In relation to the Silk Road countries, Ukraine signed a memorandum in December 2013, to enable tourist groups from China to enter easily.

Ukraine is working on reciprocity principles regarding visas with other countries, because many cultural and economic benefits can be received if the nations work together to exchange open visa policies.

Pakistan

Pakistan has quite a liberal policy for group tourists, now offers visa on arrival for groups of ten or more organized by a tour operator.

Pakistan had a lot of tourist traffic until the 90s, so the facilities and infrastructure are in place. Rail links are in bad condition these days. There is hope for the development of rail links to China.

Accommodation in Pakistan ranges from 2 USD to 250 USD, so it caters for all types of travelers.

There is also a challenge of security and visas in Pakistan.

Bangladesh

65 countries can receive visas on arrival to Bangladesh now but there is still a gap between policy and action. Visas can take two weeks for Bangladesh.

New developments include rail and bus links between India (West Bengal/Calcutta) and there are improved visa processes in place now for people travelling between India and Bangladesh by rail or bus. Bangladesh is planning to introduce an e-visa policy within 1-2 years. India is going to allow Bangladeshi citizens in the 13-65 age-group five-year multiple entry visas, so this will hopefully have a positive impact on reciprocity between the two countries.

Bangladesh is trying to position itself as a multi-destination with India, Nepal and Bhutan, therefore the Indian market is important.

Iran

Visas are not a major problem for tourism development in Iran.

Iran introduced visas on arrival for most countries (except for ten) in most cities two years ago, but this did not help tourism growth. The new government is serious about facilitating visas and the Cabinet ordered to create a working group with representatives from Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Tourism to address the issues. The first proposal was to extend the visa on arrival period from 2 to 4 weeks and the second proposal was for Iran to establish an e-visa system.

As a positive example, now Azerbaijan nationals travel to Iran without visa and more than 70,000 Azeri visited Iran in 2013 for health tourism.

Iran also plans to improve visas for Iraqi citizens; around 2 million Iraqis came to Iran in 2013 for health and pilgrimage.

Russia

Russian nationals are not required to have a visa to enter Egypt, Thailand, Turkey and CIS countries (except for Turkmenistan)

2012 and 2013 were the years of Chinese tourism in Russia (and Russian tourism in China) which increased inbound travel from China to Russia by 46%. Another similar program that started in 2014 with

South Korea and Italy is also expected to make a positive contribution to visa facilitation between these countries.

There have been some improvements for policies for Russian citizens within the Schengen zone. Russia is moving towards establishing a consulting department for visas.

There has been progress in talks with UK and the time for getting a UK visa for Russian citizens has been improved.

The 72 hour visa for cruise passengers has been successfully implemented and they are in negotiations for introducing a transit visa for business tourists.

Russia is trying to enable growth of low cost carriers, especially to promote domestic travel.

Russia is also investing in its rail systems to alleviate traffic congestion and all airports in Moscow are now connected by high speed trains.

Italy

The European Union is currently revising the visa code, it has been submitted to the new parliament and it will be issued next year. The EU is revising list of visa exempt countries. Italy has increased the number of issued visas by 10% each year. There is an agreement now between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the National Tourism Board. Italy is outsourcing the management of visas for 9 top source markets to cut red tape and help streamline visas for these important markets. This has reduced the number of days for issuing a visa and ultimately increased the number of visas.

As an example of air connecting and visa facilitating pushing growth - for Georgia, the outsourcing company now provides the visa and meanwhile, Alitalia commenced direct flights to between Rome and Tbilisi four times a week. As a result, issued visas for Georgians has increased by 75%. Occupancy on these flights in August sits around 75-90%.

Georgia

Georgia has a no-visa policy for over 100 countries. Visas on arrival are available for many other countries, only very few countries much obtain a visa prior to departure. Flights operated by low cost carriers such as Wizzair have increased visitation from Poland and the Ukraine by around 70%.

In 2012, a no visa policy (for up to 90 days) was applied for Russia which resulted in an 80% increase in Russian visitors. The same applied for Iran with a 70% increase. The new government introduced a visa policy for Iraq, nonetheless with direct flights from Baghdad to Tbilisi, the arrivals from Iraq are still high. Offering visas on arrival facilitates visas for those people who are not situated close to a Georgian Embassy.

Turkmenistan

An invitation letter is required to visit Turkmenistan, and after receiving the letter a visa can be obtained on arrival. Turkmenistan has been experience growth in the MICE market and combined tours. Tourists that travel to Turkmenistan are interested in the Silk Road.

Republic of Korea

Korea and Russia commenced a visa free contract this year, which has resulted in a 20% increase in Russian visitors to Korea and 55% increase in Koreans to Russia in the first five months of 2014 (compared to 2013). Korea is committed to facilitating visas, particularly for the Silk Road countries and will provide a full update at the next Task Force Meeting in Gyeongju, Republic of Korea.

Turkey

Turkey is very welcoming in terms of visas, and much has been done to facilitate visas over the last decade. Turkey introduced its e-visa in April 2013 which around 95 countries can now apply for. This has proven to be an easy, cost-efficient and fast way of processing visas. Turkey has bilateral agreements with many countries. Almost all of Turkey's neighbours enjoy a visa free policy.

It is also common now for visitors to access northern Turkey via Batumi airport in Georgia.

Egypt

Egypt has a visa on arrival policy at the airport for almost all countries except for 10-15. Egypt is now in recovery, around 9.5-10 million international arrivals are expected for 2014. Prior to the revolution, Egypt's international arrivals were around 14 million, and Egypt is working towards returning to that figure.

Croatia

Prior to joining the European Union, Croatia issued visas very freely, nationals of Russia, Kazakhstan, China, etc. could enter from April to October without visa.

Since joining the European Union in 2013, people wishing to travel to Croatia must apply for a Schengen visa. This has resulted in a 40% decrease in the Russia and Ukraine markets and 50% of Turkish market. Croatia is doing its best to minimize the decrease in arrivals. Local borders are functioning well. Bosnia and Herzegovina can use their National ID cards (if they are new ID cards) to enter Croatia.

Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan has made a lot of improvements in visa procedures over the last 3-4 years. Currently, Commonwealth passport holders as well as Georgia do not require a visa to enter Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan now offers Turkey and ISilk Road passport holders visas on arrival. Other nationals do need a visa to enter Azerbaijan; however they can apply through the new e-visa system launched in March 2013. There are a number of accredited tourist agencies that can process visas. Azerbaijan is also under negotiations with the EU, and hope that the results will be seen soon.

Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan is establishing a visa-free regime for 10 Countries: the United States, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the Federal Republic of Germany, France, Italy, Malaysia, Netherlands, the United Arab Emirates, the Republic of Korea and Japan. During 15 July 2014- 15 July 2015, citizens of these 10 countries holding valid diplomatic, official and national passports can enter, exit and transit through the territory of Kazakhstan on multiple occasions without a visa for up to 15 days.

Kazakhstan still has a lot to do in terms of improving visas, such as working towards an e-visa, especially in the lead up to the Expo 2017.

On the 16 June the questions of visas came up in Parliament, and it was decided that there must be a reduction in the cost of airfares to Kazakhstan. The Government told Ministries of Oil, Gas and Transport to address these issues and to reduce costs. High speed trains are also required to reduce traffic challenges in Astana, as there are in Moscow. High speed rail links between Atyrau the 'oil capital' of Kazakhstan and Astana have now been established; previously it would take 2.5 days by train and now it takes around 20 hours.

In Almaty region bordering with China, Kazakhstan nationals can enter for 72 hours without visa.

It is currently very difficult for Kazakhstan nationals to get a Schengen visa, but the process for UK visas is even more difficult, now that the visa must be processed in Istanbul rather than Almaty, as was the case previously. This meant that only 2 people from Kazakhstan tourism board could travel to WTM in 2013.

Maximising Engagement in the Silk Road Action Plan 2014/2015

Based on all the discussion of the previous sessions, participants were requested to highlight the immediate actions that could be carried out by each Member State individually and the Member States as a collective group.

Immediate Actions to be carried out by Member States Individually

- Search Engine Optimisation for Silk Road travel + your destination
- Establish dedicated Silk Road page/s on all Silk Road destination websites
- Build interest for youth market, segment markets
- Participate in UNWTO Silk Road activities
- Tell UNWTO your news! Relating to visas, new marketing campaigns, news stories related to Silk Road, Silk Road content on your website, etc.

Actions to be carried out by Member States Collectively

- Silk Road visa meeting and form Silk Road visa committees
- Development of joint package tours for Silk Road
- Increase participation in international Silk Road events and festivals
- Work with UNWTO on Silk Road activities at international fairs
- Collaboration on other Cultural Routes
- Development of Maritime Silk Road
- Collaboration on destination marketing