



SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN UZBEKISTAN: NAVIGATING OPPORTUNITIES, ADDRESSING CHALLENGES, AND CHARTING FUTURE TRAJECTORIES

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Abstract: Tourism stands out as a rapidly growing and lucrative global industry that significantly enhances international socio-economic, cultural, and spiritual ties. Uzbekistan, boasting rich cultural and historical assets, places significant emphasis on fostering tourism as a leading nation. However, a comprehensive study reveals various challenges associated with tourism development. This article delineates the priorities for advancing the tourism sector in Uzbekistan.

Keywords: Tourism, cultural and historical assets, global travel destinations, UNWTO, tourist influx, tourism products, investments, State Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan for Tourism Development, promotional campaigns, tourism information centers, lodging, ecotourism.

Alternative economic sectors and their components are increasingly becoming subjects of intense discussion in socio-economic spheres. Tourism, when strategically developed, represents one such alternative that could serve as a catalyst for infrastructural growth in the economy. In today's dynamic and globalized world economy, tourism serves as a pivotal source of currency earnings in economically advanced nations, propelling them onto the international stage and elevating the overall economic development and welfare of their citizens.

Currently, global tourism is experiencing a resurgence, with a 4.5% increase in revenues, laying a promising foundation for more robust development in the industry. According to the UNWTO World Tourism Barometer's latest data, international tourist arrivals grew by 4.4% in 2015, reaching a total of 1,184 million people, compared to 1,138 million in 2014. This indicates that approximately 50 million more tourists explored global travel destinations in 2015.



The year 2015 marked new heights for international tourism, contributing significantly to economic growth and job creation worldwide. Therefore, it is imperative for countries to adopt policies that foster sustained tourism growth, encompassing travel facilitation, human resource development, and environmental sustainability.

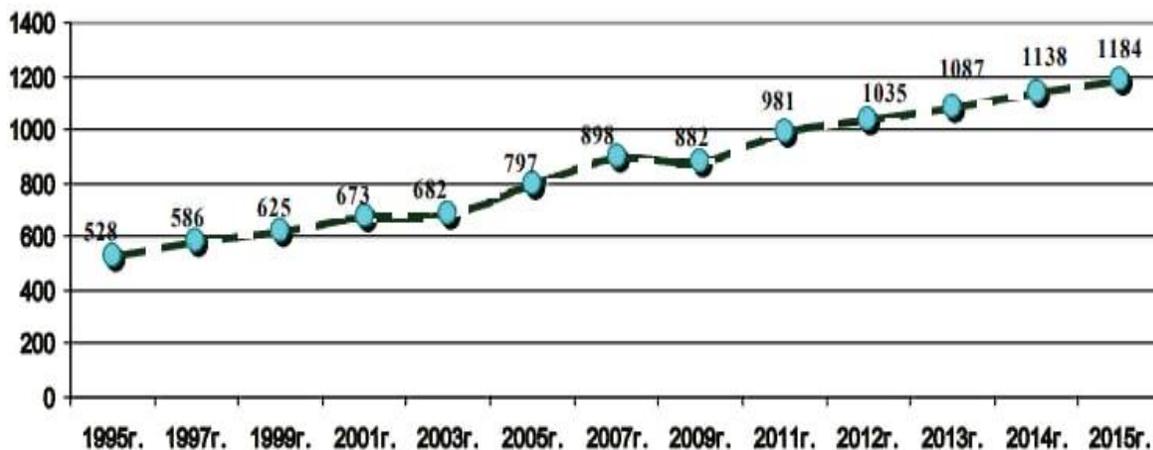


Figure 1: Dynamics of Global Tourist Arrivals (1995–2015)

Tourism stands out as one of the rapidly expanding and highly lucrative industries globally, playing a crucial role in fortifying international socio-economic, cultural, and spiritual ties. In recent times, it has evolved into a major export industry within the world economy, constituting an average of 11% of the global GDP.

Over the past four decades, the number of individuals traveling to other countries has surged nearly 20-fold, while income generated from tourism has seen an astonishing 60-fold increase. International tourism's financial impact surpasses 400 billion dollars, underlining its substantial contribution to the global economy. Currently, the tourism sector provides employment to approximately 192 million people, equivalent to 8% of the world's population.

Beyond its economic significance, international tourism plays a pivotal role in diversifying economies by fostering the creation of industries catering to the needs of tourists. This multifaceted impact on the economy is integral to the broader development goals.

According to experts, several key factors influence the annual growth in the number of tourists, including advancements in transportation, communication, increasing mobility, urbanization, reduced working hours, and the rise in social wealth.



The global tourism industry leaders, as reported by the "Financial Times" in December 2016, highlighted Uzbekistan as the second hottest tourist destination for 2017, following Nepal. The country is deemed ideal for those seeking the allure of the Silk Road without extensive travel. Uzbekistan offers the opportunity to explore the charms of ancient cities like Samarkand, Bukhara, and Khiva, showcasing mosques, mausoleums, mosaics, and minarets.

Uzbekistan, as one of the oldest centers of world civilization, boasts unparalleled tourist potential in the region. With over 7000 historical and architectural sites, including UNESCO-listed ancient cities, it annually attracts around two million foreign visitors from 70 countries.

Since gaining independence, Uzbekistan has taken significant steps in tourism development. The establishment of the national company "Uzbektourism" in 1992 played a pivotal role in coordinating tourism organizations, training, and stimulating the industry's diverse growth. The legislative foundation for tourism, established in 1999, focuses on infrastructure development, investment attraction, product diversification, intensified efforts to attract foreign visitors, and the enhancement of professional skills.

Uzbekistan's entry into the UN World Tourism Organization in 1993 marked a significant milestone. Despite having considerable potential, challenges persist. The analysis reveals a lack of attention, especially financial support, for tourism infrastructure development. Issues such as institutional, managerial, and human resource problems, as well as a lack of interagency coordination, pose challenges. The absence of a coherent policy negatively impacts hospitality management to some extent.

Experts estimate that recent revenues from international tourism in Uzbekistan represent no more than 10% of its potential. Despite having significant potential, tourism income in Uzbekistan remains below 2% of GDP, in stark contrast to other countries where tourism revenues range from 10 to 45% of GDP. This discrepancy raises questions about the causes and necessitates finding solutions to enhance the country's earning capacity in the tourism industry (see Table 1).

Table 1.– Comparative analysis of selected indicators of the world by the tourism industry (million people); (Based on the official of materials prepared by the author)



Name of country	The share of tourism in GDP	Number of attendance in 2015	Responsible state agency
France	7%	84,5	Tourism Development Agency
USA	3%	80	absent
Malaysia	14,9%	25,7	Ministry of tourism
Turkey	4,5%	36,24	Ministry of tourism
India	6%	8	Ministry of tourism
Uzbekistan	1,8%	2	The State Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan on the development of tourism

Despite witnessing some growth in the tourism sector, starting from a relatively low level, Uzbekistan still faces challenges in translating its considerable potential into tangible success on the international stage. These obstacles hinder significant progress and prevent the country from achieving notable success in the tourism industry. Key challenges include a lack of financial resources, an outdated regulatory framework, underdeveloped infrastructure, a monotonous tour product with low diversification, and barriers to obtaining entry visas for foreigners.

To unleash the full potential of tourism as a strategic sector for Uzbekistan's economy, comprehensive measures are essential. This involves creating favorable economic and legal conditions, maximizing the use of regional tourism potential, implementing radical improvements in tourism industry management, developing a national tourist product, promoting it on the global stage, shaping a positive image of Uzbekistan in the tourism sphere, and ensuring sustainable and balanced tourism activity. Other critical aspects include establishing the necessary material and technical infrastructure, ensuring the safety of life and health for both foreign tourists and citizens, and fostering equitable economic cooperation with foreign countries.

These objectives are outlined in the Decrees of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan dated December 2, 2016, under the numbers DP-4861 and Since December 22, 2016, when Presidential Decree №DP-4895 was issued, Uzbekistan has witnessed a renewed impetus in the development of its tourism sector. These pivotal decrees introduced significant changes and innovations to the tourism landscape:

1. **Identification of Targets and Priorities:** The medium-term perspective for state policy in the tourism sector has been clearly outlined.
2. **Establishment of the State Committee:** The State Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan on the Development of Tourism has been formed, replacing the previously dissolved national company "Uzbektourism."



3. Government Mandate for Development: The government has been tasked with formulating the concept of tourist industry development in Uzbekistan for the medium term (2017–2021), along with a specific implementation program.

4. Changes in Licensing and Certification: Alterations have been made in the licensing procedure for tourist activities and the certification of tourist services.

5. Visa Regime Adjustments: Starting January 1, 2021, the visa regime will be lifted for citizens from 15 leading countries in Europe, America, and Asia, visiting Uzbekistan for tourist purposes for up to 30 days. Additionally, citizens aged 55 and above from 12 countries will enjoy visa-free entry for the same duration.

Drawing on the experiences of developed countries in tourism management (such as the United States, France, the United Kingdom, Austria, and Spain), the decrees aim to enhance efficiency in Uzbekistan's tourism industry. These countries demonstrate clear distinctions in the functions of government, tourism industry, and business control in public administration of tourism.

Moving forward, several strategic steps have been proposed for the development of tourism in Uzbekistan:

1. Tourist Rating and Investment: Attention should be given to the development and monitoring of national and regional programs for integrated tourism development. This involves attracting foreign investments, loans, and grants for enhancing tourist infrastructure.

2. Exploration of Untapped Opportunities: The focus should be on studying opportunities for various types of tourism such as medical, rural, pilgrimage, religious, eco-tourism, gastronomy, wine tourism, and tourism for pensioners.

3. Use of Funds for Publicity Campaigns: Extra-budgetary funds should be extensively utilized for tourism publicity campaigns, maintaining tourism information centers, enhancing infrastructure for historical heritages and ski resorts, and investing in airlines or corporate development of tourism.

4. ICT Industry Integration: The information and communication technology (ICT) industry should be a focal point for modernizing tourist activities. Implementing modern ICT and software enhances the quality of tourism services, necessitating a unified system in Uzbekistan.

5. Establishment of Republican Tourist Portal: A unified virtual space, the Republican tourist portal, should be created to consolidate all tourist organizations under the State Committee for tourism development.



6. Upgrading Tourism Infrastructure: Uzbekistan's tourism infrastructure needs comprehensive improvement to meet international standards. This includes inventorying tourism infrastructure objects and categorizing them based on international service standards.

7. Promotion of Inner Tourism: Stimulating domestic tourism, supporting tour operators engaged in domestic tourism, and incorporating tourist and excursion activities into the education system are crucial.

8. Diversification and Special Services: Focused efforts are needed for the development of related tourism services such as sports (sailing, golf, mountaineering), wellness (thermal water, surgery, physiotherapy), and the revival of national values.

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