ENSURING ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT THROUGH THE EFFECTIVE UTILIZATION OF UZBEKISTAN'S TOURISM POTENTIAL

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Abstract: Tourism is one of the key sectors contributing to national economic development, increasing investment opportunities, creating new jobs, and strengthening international economic relations. Uzbekistan possesses significant tourism potential due to its rich historical and cultural heritage, unique architectural monuments, natural landscapes, and traditional hospitality. Official statistical data indicate a steady increase in the number of international visitors to the country in recent years. In 2023, approximately 7 million tourists visited Uzbekistan for various purposes. According to the forecasts set for 2024, the number of tourists was expected to reach 10 million. These figures highlight the growing importance of tourism in the national economy and its potential to become one of the leading sectors of economic development.

Keywords: tourism potential, economic development, Uzbekistan, tourism industry, international tourism, foreign investment, sustainable development, tourist flow, tourism infrastructure.

The development of tourism contributes not only to the growth of the tourism industry itself but also to the development of numerous related economic sectors. Tourism is no longer limited to leisure, recreation, and cultural exploration; it has become an important instrument for strengthening national economies, attracting investment, creating employment opportunities, expanding service exports, and promoting international cooperation. For Uzbekistan, a country with a rich historical, cultural, architectural, and natural heritage, the effective utilization of tourism potential plays a particularly important role in ensuring sustainable economic development. The country's strategic geographical location along the ancient Great Silk Road, its historical cities, architectural monuments, traditional crafts, national customs, and distinctive gastronomy create significant opportunities for strengthening its position in the international tourism market. The economic importance of tourism is primarily reflected in its close relationship with various other sectors of the economy. The provision of tourism services involves hospitality, transportation, catering, retail trade, construction, communications, information technology, agriculture, culture, and other service industries. Consequently, tourism development stimulates economic activity not only within the tourism sector but also across interconnected industries. For example, international tourists visiting Uzbekistan spend money on accommodation, restaurants, transportation, excursions, entertainment, and locally produced souvenirs. These expenditures increase the revenues of local businesses and contribute to the development of small and medium-sized enterprises. In this regard, tourism has a multiplier effect on the national economy. According to the information provided, every 20 tourists visiting a country contribute to the creation of one direct job in tourism and two additional jobs in other tourism-related economic sectors.

Uzbekistan's tourism potential and economic opportunities have expanded considerably in recent years as a result of ongoing reforms, improvements in tourism infrastructure, and the country's growing international recognition. According to official statistical information, approximately 7 million foreign tourists visited Uzbekistan in 2023 for various purposes. This figure demonstrates the increasing attractiveness of Uzbekistan as an international tourist destination and reflects the results of measures

aimed at developing the country's tourism industry. For 2024, the target was to increase the number of foreign visitors to 10 million. Such indicators highlight the growing importance of tourism in the national economy and its potential to become one of the major drivers of economic growth. However, an increase in tourist arrivals alone does not automatically guarantee economic efficiency. It is equally important to improve service quality, modernize tourism infrastructure, extend visitors' length of stay, increase their expenditure within the local economy, and develop competitive tourism products.

The development of tourism has been identified as one of the priority areas of Uzbekistan's national development policy. In particular, the Uzbekistan–2030 Strategy establishes several objectives aimed at utilizing the country's tourism potential effectively, strengthening its position in the international tourism market, and increasing tourism service exports. According to the strategy, by 2030, Uzbekistan aims to attract 15 million foreign tourists, increase the number of domestic tourists to 25 million, and welcome 3 million visitors through pilgrimage tourism. In addition, the strategy increasing accommodation capacity at least twofold through private investment, expanding the number of tourism villages to 175, increasing tourism service exports to 5 billion US dollars, and raising annual exports of medical and educational tourism services to 1.5 billion US dollars. These objectives demonstrate that tourism should be developed not merely as a means of increasing visitor numbers but as an integrated economic sector capable of generating income, creating employment, and stimulating other industries.

Tourism development also received considerable attention in the Development Strategy of New Uzbekistan for 2022–2026. Within the chapter dedicated to accelerating national economic development and ensuring high growth rates, Goal 35 emphasized the importance of the “Travel around Uzbekistan” programme. The programme established objectives to increase the number of domestic tourists to more than 12 million and attract 9 million foreign visitors to the country. To achieve these targets, several important measures were identified. One of them was the introduction of accessible tourism infrastructure in the country's major tourist cities. This initiative aims to ensure that tourism facilities and services are accessible to people with disabilities, elderly visitors, and individuals with different needs. Such an approach improves the inclusiveness of tourism and strengthens Uzbekistan's attractiveness as an international destination. Another important objective was to double employment in the tourism sector and reach 520,000 employed people by 2026. This target clearly demonstrates the importance of tourism in expanding employment opportunities and improving the economic well-being of the population.

Furthermore, the strategy emphasized the development of tourism and cultural heritage infrastructure and the adoption of a state programme for the effective utilization of more than 8,000 cultural heritage sites. These measures are important not only for preserving historical monuments but also for transforming cultural heritage into a sustainable source of economic development.

Number of foreign tourists visiting Uzbekistan in 2018–2023

Year	Planned Number (thousand people)	Actual Number (thousand people)	Implementation Rate (%)
2018	5,346.0	5,346.2	100.0
2019	6,041.0	6,748.5	111.7
2020	7,010.0	1,504.1	21.5
2021	1,700.0	1,881.3	110.7
2022	2,720.0	5,232.8	192.4
2023	7,000.0	6,626.3	94.7

Table 1. “Number of foreign tourists visiting Uzbekistan in 2018–2023” https://cedr.uz/

Another important objective of the national development strategy is to transform Samarkand into a “Tourism Gateway” and increase the volume of tourism services at least tenfold over the following five

years while creating employment opportunities for 40,000 people in the sector. Samarkand is one of Uzbekistan's most internationally recognized historical cities due to its architectural heritage and significant contribution to the development of science, culture, and civilization. The establishment of the Samarkand Tourism Centre, including the “Eternal City” historical complex and the necessary infrastructure in 2022, represents an important initiative aimed at expanding the city's modern tourism opportunities.

Today, tourism exists in numerous forms and categories, each based on the natural, historical, cultural, and economic characteristics of a particular destination. Uzbekistan has considerable opportunities to develop historical and cultural tourism, domestic tourism, international tourism, agritourism, rural tourism, ethnotourism, pilgrimage tourism, ecotourism, educational tourism, gastronomic tourism, sports tourism, and MICE tourism. The effective integration of these tourism products can diversify the country's tourism industry, satisfy the different interests of visitors, and reduce the negative effects of seasonal fluctuations.

Historical and cultural tourism represents one of the most significant directions of Uzbekistan's tourism industry. Cities such as Samarkand, Bukhara, Khiva, Shahrisabz, and Termez attract international visitors through their ancient architectural monuments, historical complexes, museums, and cultural heritage. Developing tourism services in these cities, improving infrastructure around historical attractions, training qualified tour guides, and strengthening international promotional activities can further increase tourist arrivals. In particular, creating multilingual digital information about historical monuments, organizing virtual tours, and introducing interactive technologies can attract younger generations and international visitors.

In conclusion, Uzbekistan possesses considerable tourism potential that can contribute significantly to economic diversification, sustainable economic growth, employment creation, foreign investment attraction, and the expansion of service exports. The objectives established in the Uzbekistan–2030 Strategy and the Development Strategy of New Uzbekistan for 2022–2026 demonstrate the importance of tourism as one of the country's priority economic sectors. Achieving these objectives requires an integrated approach that combines historical and cultural tourism, pilgrimage tourism, ecotourism, rural and agricultural tourism, ethnotourism, gastronomic tourism, educational tourism, medical tourism, sports tourism, and MICE tourism. It is equally important to modernize infrastructure, introduce digital technologies, attract private investment, improve service quality, and train qualified specialists. Above all, tourism development must ensure the interests of local communities, preserve historical and cultural heritage, and promote the responsible use of natural resources.

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