



## New Developments in Promoting Tourism in Uzbekistan

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### Abstract

In the Republic of Uzbekistan, reforms are presently underway to develop the tourism sector as one of the strategic sectors of the national economy. It is hoped that in the long term this will help to solve many of the important social and economic issues such as job creation, diversification of the economy and accelerated development of regions, as well as increasing incomes and quality of life of the country's population. When developing measures to ensure accelerated development of the tourism industry of the Republic of Uzbekistan, the main tasks and priorities of the state government policy in the sphere of tourism includes giving tourism the status of a strategic sector of the economy and is making this industry a powerful tool for sustainable development. Presently, most visitors who decide to travel to Uzbekistan are only interested in visiting the cultural and historical attractions and they stay for only a short amount of time. However, if the government wants tourists to come for a longer time period and to encourage repeat visitations, they must promote other niche tourism markets as well as cultural tourism such as adventure tourism, gastronomic and wine tourism and religious tourism.

### Keywords

Tourism industry; silk road; government policy; Uzbekistan; niche tourism; cultural tourism

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## Introduction

Tourism is becoming one of the largest and fastest growing industries in the global economy (UNWTO, 2019), and is seen as an important driving force for economic development (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2012). Recent trends have shown clear evidence of tourism's continued growth and importance in Asian countries, which continue to exceed the global average (Mc.A Baker, 2013). One such country is Uzbekistan, which is now beginning to show clear evidence that it has the future potential to become a 'major player' in the tourism market of Central Asia. Because of Uzbekistan's unique history, which is based on its strong cultural, archeological and natural attractions, it is now providing greater opportunities to open up the country to become a major tourist destination. This is because of its ancient history, especially in the Southern region of the State, which was the site for the most direct trade route between China and Europe. This trade route was named the 'Silk Route,' which was first established in early Roman times (Kantarci, Uysal & Magini, 2014).

However it was not until 1992 that the government of the Republic of Uzbekistan (as it had seceded from the Soviet Union in 1991) began to seriously promote tourism by establishing the first national tourism company 'Uzbektourism,' which for the first time provided tourist information that related to advertising, information services, licensing, statistics, as well as the compilation of economic data. Further developments occurred in December 2016, when a Decree from the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan formally announced the need for, "measures to ensure the accelerated development of the tourism sector of the Republic of Uzbekistan" (Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2016). As a result, the new State Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan was established as the main authorized state body for the tourism industry, with the main objectives of developing tourism infrastructure and a more efficient transportation system; to establish a number of new touristic routes; to simplify visa procedures; and to promote Uzbekistan as a national tourist product to the global marketplace.

The State Committee's main priority is to encourage the 'dynamic' promotion of the tourism sector, which is based on Uzbekistan's ancient civilizations and different cultures. Cultural tourism became the major focus as there are more than 4,000 rare historical monuments in the country, housed with many other unique architectural mausoleums, minarets and mosques in the ancient cities of Samarkand, Bukhara and Khiva. In addition, a total of 140 historical and architectural sites have now been included in the list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Based on these archaeological discoveries, Uzbekistan is now ranked ninth in the world for the total number of historical and architectural monuments. Hasanovich (2017) concluded that Uzbekistan has great potential for the development of tourism because of its rich cultural and historical traditions.

The aim of this paper is to educate interested readers about the current developments to promote tourism in Uzbekistan, and to encourage increased numbers of foreign tourists to visit. In addition, the authors will discuss several niche tourism initiatives that have been introduced in countries that have been successful in attracting increased numbers of tourists. Finally, we will discuss these new initiatives to determine if they can be successfully implemented in Uzbekistan to promote future tourism development.

A literature review was undertaken through an intensive review of secondary sources using an iterative search of multiple literature databases such as the Web of Science, Scopus and Google Scholar. Several journal articles that focused on tourism and economic development in Uzbekistan were retrieved, and a number of research studies that focused on niche tourism were identified and analyzed. The articles were published between 1997 and 2018. Each of these papers used secondary sources, as well as qualitative and quantitative methodologies, and each of the key words for this study were used to expand the literature search.

The significance of this paper is that we are able to examine how Uzbekistan, as a neonate destination, could be seen as a representative case study that is able to provide a model of tourism development for other emerging countries that are in a similar economic, political and social state of affairs. That is, to use tourism as a major tool for the development of the economy, and as a major creator of jobs for the tourism industry.

### **New Developments in Promoting Tourism in Uzbekistan**

Among its many initiatives, the State Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan for Tourism Development is providing assistance to tourism companies to establish direct business contacts with foreign travel companies through the holding of the International Uzbek Tourist Exhibition and the Tashkent International Tourism Fair. In 2017, the State Committee supported a total of 118 new businesses that began to operate in Uzbekistan, of which 60 focused on hotel services, while 58 provided tourist services.

Furthermore, the growth of tourism revenue had increased substantially by 2018. That is, in 1996 tourist revenue only amounted to \$15 million USD, which was approximately 0.11% of gross national product (GDP), with the number of tourists totaling 173,000 visitors. By 2018, the country's growth in tourism has increased substantially, with revenue amounting to \$1.31 billion USD, or 2.6% of GDP (World Data.info, 2018). In addition, the total number of tourists had also increased exponentially to 5.35 million. However, this is still quite small compared to other countries such as France (7% of GDP); Turkey (4.5% of GDP); and India (6% of GNP) (Hasanovich, 2017).

Much of this increased growth in numbers of tourists and tourism revenue has been attributed to many of the initiatives that were initiated by the State Committee for Tourism Development. This has included several marketing initiatives, such as study visits to Uzbekistan by journalists from the foreign media. Based on the results of these trips, many photographs, videos and articles on tourism opportunities were produced and/or written to promote 'Uztourism'.

Furthermore, data was collected in the border regions from visitors through communication technologies. Registration procedures for foreign citizens were also envisaged in the future through the filing of on-line travel route/s. It is expected that this will help contribute to support the development of active tourism, eco-tourism and agro-tourism. Proposals were also advocated to help simplify visa and registration procedures for foreigner visitors. This will decrease the requirements for entry into the country, as well as to diversify tourist flows based on the requirements of the market and the specific interests of foreign visitors.

Independent travelers have not been overlooked, as taxi orders for traveling to restaurants, as well as an 'alarm button app' for mobile phones that helps the safety of tourists, particularly those traveling to natural outdoor areas with special interest in ecotourism, have been introduced. The «Uzbekistan Pass» has also been developed as a mobile app. that provides detailed information about cultural and historical places to visit. The tourism industry itself is actively encouraging the introduction of information communication technologies (ICT) to improve services especially for hotels and transport companies that want to use online booking systems and mobile applications. In another positive initiative before COVID-19 when the airlines stopped flying, Uzbekistan Airlines announced discounted fares for group travel, as well as providing additional flights to fly to further historical areas of Uzbekistan.

Other proposals included the encouragement of foreign investment and the granting of tax incentives to hotel and tourist services. In particular, they provided assistance by exempting them from corporate income, and property tax, as well as other types of taxation relief, such as hotels only needing to pay a single social payment from their payroll fund if they employed qualified foreign specialists as management personnel; and that the income of qualified foreign specialists who were invited as hotel management personnel was also exempt from personal income tax.

These initiatives from the State Committee of Tourism have proved to be useful in the short term because they were seen as a means of attracting tourists through a range of positive business strategies and tax incentives. However, one area that the State Committee overlooked was the need to develop a range of marketing strategies that would encourage the development of other niche or special interest tourist markets, which will be further discussed in the next section.

### **Niche Tourism as an Alternative to Mass Tourism**

With the growing maturity of the global tourism market, a new trend has emerged in recent years, which is the movement away from what has been termed ‘mass tourism’, or the more traditional form of *tourism* development, or as it is known today as ‘overpopulation’. According to a report by the UNWTO (2018, p. 6) overpopulation has been defined as, “*The impact of tourism on a destination, or parts thereof, that excessively influences perceived quality of life of citizens and/or quality of visitors’ experiences in a negative way*”. The trend is now away from overpopulation toward what has been termed ‘special interest’ or ‘niche tourism’ which has been described as the need for travelers to seek out new and exotic tourism markets, especially the more experienced and highly engaged consumer. Huh and Singh (2007) stated that because of the maturity of the tourism marketplace, coupled with its fierce competition and a more engaged consumer, a desire to seek out new niche tourism markets has resulted.

The definition of niche tourism has been used interchangeably in the tourism literature with the term *special interest tourism* (Douglas, Douglas, & Derrett, 2001), which Douglas has defined as, “The provision of customised leisure and recreational experiences driven by the specific expressed interests of individuals and groups” (p. 3) and is considered to be the complete antithesis of mass tourism. Special interest tourism is described as being more sustainable than mass tourism because the group size is smaller (typically from between 10 and 15 tourists); visitors are generally better educated and experienced and the main focus of the trip is to experience authentic, environmental and/or cultural experiences (Douglas, et al, 2001). The concept of niche tourism has evolved from the term niche marketing. Niche marketing became accepted as a term in the 1990s and is now regarded as an alternative to the traditional mass tourist market. Dalgic and Leeuw (1994) described a ‘niche’ as compact with specialized appeal to a fairly small and well-defined group whose members are distinguished by common needs and interests. Dalgic et al. (1994) further defined a niche market as, “a small, profitable, homogeneous market segment which had been ignored or neglected in the past” (p. 42). Many small to medium-sized enterprises have focused on niche marketing in order to survive in a highly competitive environment so that they can maximize their marketing advantages.

Niche tourism as distinct from niche marketing has been defined by Beech and Chadwick (2006) as...“a small specialised sector of tourism which appeals to a correspondingly tightly defined market segment” (p. 557). Novelli (2005) described in greater detail the characteristics of niche tourism as: (1) part of a wider structural process of diversification, (2) based on a growing need for products which are non-standardized and unusual, and (3) relying on new destinations or activities to meet the demands of changing markets. Novelli (2005) also described how niche tourism

can be broken into a number of different macro-niches (e.g., cultural, environmental, rural, urban tourism, etc.) and into further sub-sets or micro-niches (e.g., cultural tourism might be broken into the following micro-niches - heritage, tribal, religious and educational tourism).

In Uzbekistan, Hasanovich (2017) advocated for the necessity of providing greater scientific studies of the underutilized opportunities for niche markets such as medical tourism, rural tourism, pilgrimage and religious tourism, eco-tourism and gastronomy and wine tourism. Baxtishodovich, Suyunovich and Kholiqulov (2017) also discussed the importance of promoting religious, adventure and gastronomic tourism as promising niche markets for Uzbekistan. This was in response to the changing tastes of consumers who have been described as travelling more frequently, and because many are more experienced and discerning travelers.

Based on these initial observations, what can we learn from an analysis of the following niche tourist markets: cultural and heritage tourism, gastronomy and wine tourism, adventure tourism, and religious tourism? The next section will provide an analysis of each specific niche market including a definition/s, some of the main characteristics of the niche market, and a discussion of some of the niche tourism markets that have recently proven popular. It is hoped that this will enable us to learn more from other countries and their development of their niche tourism markets to determine whether they are realistic alternative tourism options for Uzbekistan in the future.

### **Cultural and Heritage Tourism**

Conceptual definitions have mainly concentrated on what motivates tourists to visit cultural attractions and are related to learning about the history and heritage of others, or contemporary ways of life or thought. Cultural tourism has been defined by the World Tourism Organization (Report *WTO, 2012*) as, “Trips, whose main or concomitant goal is visiting the sites and events whose cultural and historical value has turned them into being a part of the cultural heritage of a community”.

Cultural tourism is now recognized as one of the largest and fastest growing global tourism markets because, “The cultural and creative industries are increasingly being used to promote [cultural] destinations” (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 2009, p. 10). More recently a UNWTO (2018) report emphasized that the field of cultural tourism has moved away from the previous emphasis on classic western tangible heritage, toward a much broader and inclusive field of diverse cultural practices throughout the world (Richards, 2018).

In the 1990’s cultural tourism became a major force for economic and urban revitalization. Governments around the world were increasingly turning to museums,

performing arts centers, arts districts, and other cultural activities to promote and revitalize their cities (Grodach & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2007). This is because of the growing awareness of the need to preserve cultural heritage before it disappears. Because of this belief, there is a general perception that cultural tourism is 'good' tourism, that it attracts wealthier tourists than average visitors, and does little damage to the environment or the local culture while contributing a great deal to the economy as well as supporting a diversity of cultural activities.

The cultural and heritage tourism literature has been dominated in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century by research that has centered on Europe (Balcar & Pearce, 1996). According to the European Commission, there are approximately 200,000 protected monuments in the European Union (EU), and 2.5 million buildings of historical interest (European Commission, 1998, in Richards, 2001). Although heritage is a universal phenomenon, to date the developed countries of Europe have made the most use of heritage tourism and devoted their greatest efforts to an understanding of its history and traditions (Ashworth & Larkham, 1994; Nuryanti, 1996). More recently we have seen the rising popularity of a number of Middle East countries as emerging tourism destinations because of such factors as their traditional food and ancient traditions that are also likely to boost the cultural tourism market growth in this region.

### **Gastronomy Tourism**

Wolf (2006) defined gastronomy tourism as "...travel in order to search for, and enjoy prepared food and drink and unique and memorable gastronomic experiences" (p. 20). Gastronomy tourism also refers to the originality of a dish, and whether it is indigenous to a place, a region or a country (Hall & Mitchell, 2000; Green & Dogherty, 2008; Sormaz, Akmese, Gunes, et al. 2016).

The World Tourism Organization concluded that gastronomy tourism has recently emerged as an important area of growth, not only because food and drink are central to the tourist experience, but because the concept of gastronomy tourism has evolved to include a wide range of cultural practices.

"Gastronomy tourism represents an opportunity to constantly revitalize and diversify tourism, promote local economic development, involve many different professional sectors and bring new uses to the primary sector. Hence, gastronomy tourism contributes to promoting and branding destinations, maintaining and preserving local traditions and diversities, and harnessing and rewarding authenticity." (World Tourism Organization, 2017, p. 14).

The type of food often represents the actual cultural traditions and has generally been seen as an essential element of the cultural experience for gastronomy tourists (Everett & Slocum 2013). Gastronomy has an enormous capacity to single out a



specific destination as being unique (Antón, Camarero, Laguna, et al. 2019) and is increasingly recognized as a means of encouraging people to come together, and to relate to each other's different social, cultural and political perspectives (Oosterveer 2006). Local food can play an important role in the sustainable tourism experience because it appeals to the visitor's desire for authenticity within the holiday experience (Sims, 2009).

Some of the key trends observed that have redefined gastronomy tourism in recent years are an increase in street food and food markets, cooking lessons for local community members, and gastronomy tours with locals or experts. (GlobalData, 2018). Rand, Heath, and Alberts (2003) noted that gastronomy tourism had the following benefits that include, "The ... potential to enhance sustainability in tourism; contributes to the authenticity of the destination; strengthens the local economy; and provides for the environmentally friendly infrastructure" (p. 97).

Richards (2003) noted the strong links that gastronomy plays in cultural tourism because it, "...has become a significant source of identity formation in postmodern society" (p. 3). Gastronomic tourism is now seen as one of the most important ways of strengthening and consolidating certain tourist destinations, by eating at a specific restaurant, or simply becoming familiar with the local cuisine of a specific geographic area and is seen as the primary motivation for the trip (Galvez, Lopez-Guzman, Buiza, et al. 2017).

Over the last few years, Turkey has become one of the best gastronomic tourism destinations in the world to visit. According to the findings from several academic studies, tourists who travel to Turkey want to know and experience the Turkish cuisine culture (Pekyaman, 2008). It has become famous for its dishes such as kebabs. Recent studies have shown that the taste and diversity of Turkish cuisine is a major factor in attracting foreign tourists who regard Turkish cuisine as rich, attractive and delicious (Sahin, 2015).

Turkish cuisine is regarded as one of the oldest and best cuisines (Akgöl, 2012). This is because of the geographic location of Turkey and its historical foundations that has strongly contributed to form a Turkish cuisine culture, which has created a great diversity in its cuisine (Sahin, 2015).

### **Wine Tourism**

Eno-tourism (or wine tourism) is regarded as a sub-type of gastronomy tourism, and refers to tourists whose main purpose is to visit vineyards and wineries, to enjoy tasting, consuming and/or purchasing wine, often at or near the source (Committee on Tourism and Competitiveness (CTC) of UNWTO) (2019). The most popular



definition of wine tourism is by Hall, Johnson, Cramborne, et al. (2000); “Visitation to vineyards, wineries, wine festivals and wine shows for which grape wine tasting and/or experiencing the attributes of a grape wine region are the prime motivating factors for visitors” (p. 3).

The wine tourist is rarely interested in simply wine tasting, rather it is the ‘total experience’ which is of the utmost importance (Roberts and Sparks, 2006). The wine tourism experience not only consists of the provision of good wine but also requires, “...quality dining opportunities and other attributes to create a unique experience and ambience” (Dowling & Getz, 2000, p. 57), or a “bundle of benefits” (Getz & Brown, 2006). Dowling et al. (2000) further described the main characteristics of the wine tourism experience. This includes the scenery surrounding the winery; the location and entrance to the winery itself; staff at the winery - their manner of greeting and welcoming visitors; value for money, and trade-off decisions such as whether I dine at the winery or buy wine to take home. Good service is also a determining factor for future visits, highlighting the importance of personal interaction (O’Neill & Charters, 2000). However, it is the memories that the visitors take away with them of unique aspects of their visit, as well as the familiarity developed with the people of the region that helps to bring them back for return visits.

Regarding the main markets for wine tourism, the ‘The Old World’ producers within Europe have a long, uninterrupted history of wine production and consumption. Although Europe is the second smallest continent, it produced 73% of all wine in 2001. The four largest European producers, France, Italy, Spain and Germany account for 73% of European wine production and 54% of global production. In contrast, the ‘New World’ wine producing countries are defined as those outside of Europe. Five of the largest and most established New World producers are the United States, Argentina, Australia, South Africa and Chile. These five countries comprise 82% of non-European volume and 23% of global production in 2001 (Cholette, Castaldi and Frederick, 2005).

Italy is the prime destination for tourists whose holidays focus on wine tasting and cuisine. English speaking tourists might prefer to visit Tuscany for wine tourism experiences.

Tuscany offers wine tourists the four things that they regard as most important: a spectacular landscape, high culture, excellent food, and great wines. The network of hotels, country inns, and restaurants supports the industry throughout the province, in its cities, towns, and villages. In addition, the large number of antique fairs, art festivals, concerts and other cultural events also add to the attraction of Tuscany as a premiere wine tourism location (Colombini, 2015).

## Adventure and Nature Based Tourism

Adventure tourism is one of the fastest growing sectors of the tourist industry (UNWTO, 2014). This is because numerous travelers want to experience the outdoors, to participate in programs that require action and excitement, to be physically challenged rather than passive sightseers. Many are seeking unique and special experiences often in remote locations. This type of travel experience generally involves travelling in smaller groups and often experiencing different types of risks (Patterson, 2018).

Adventure often denotes action; it is not a passive experience and is generally found to be engaging and absorbing (Swarbooke, Beard, Leckie, et al. (2003). Ewert (2000) defined adventure tourism as:

“A self-initiated recreational activity typically involving a travel and overnight stay component that usually involves a close interaction with the natural environment, structurally contains elements of perceived or real risk and danger, and has an uncertain outcome that can be influenced by the participant and/or circumstance” (p. 23).

Thus, an adventure can by its very nature be a risky undertaking. Sung (2004) concluded that, “An *individual would be engaged in adventure travel for the purpose of gaining pleasure and personal meaning through participation in leisure pursuits in a specific setting*” (p. 345).

In recent years, many emerging economies have exhibited faster growth than ‘First World’ countries in adventure tourism, especially in Asia, Central and Eastern Europe, the Middle East and Africa. Destinations are now recognizing that travelers are seeking more authentic products and are attempting to appeal to adventure travelers: e.g., Norway capitalizes on its towering fjords and glaciers with the slogan, “Powered by Nature”. Greenland emphasizes its ruggedness with, “Greenland, Be a Pioneer”, New Zealand emphasizes its culture, mountains, wildlife and hiking with “100% Pure New Zealand”; while Slovenia promotes hiking, mountains and caves in its, “I Feel Slovenia” campaign (UNWTO, 2014).

Hiking and cycling in particular are providing important market opportunities in many countries with different terrain and landscapes. Projects such as the extension of the New Zealand Cycle Trail or Nga Haerenga (The Journeys); the promotion of an award-winning walks network in Luxemburg; the development of cycle trails in Israel; and the continued development of the European cycle route network called ‘Euorvelo’ which is a network of 16 long distance cycling routes that crisscross Europe are in various stages of completion (OECD, 2018).

There is a constant need for the development of greater opportunities that focus on nature-based tourism, wilderness areas and outdoor activities (Winter, Selin, Cerveny,

et al. 2019). A number of countries such as Canada and Chile have active programs to strengthen their destination image through links to their national parks (OECD, 2018). Nature based tourism has also proven to be successful as a sustainable development tool in rural parts of Romania (Vaetisi, 2006), and several other countries in Central and Eastern Europe.

### **Religious Tourism**

Religious tourism is considered to be one of the oldest forms of travel dating back to ancient times (Jackowski & Smith 1992). Every year millions of people travel to major pilgrimage destinations around the world, both ancient and modern in origin. Jackowski (2000) estimated that between 220 and 240 million people a year go on pilgrimages, with the majority being Christian (150 million), Muslim (40 million), and Hindu (30 million). Timothy and Dalton (2006) attributed religious travel to the search for truth, enlightenment, or an authentic experience with the divine or holy.

The World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) definition of religious tourism refers to, "...all travel outside the usual environment for religious purposes". This is one of the oldest forms of tourism and that has also been referred to as 'faith tourism' or 'spiritual tourism'. Some examples of religious tourism activities include religious tourist attractions, pilgrimages, monastery visits and guest stays; retreats and faith-based camps, and religious conventions and rallies. In recent years there has been a rediscovery of places and routes of a religious nature (Digance 2003).

It is estimated that between 300 and 330 million people travel for religious reasons annually, generating an economic impact of about 18,000 million dollars (Durán-Sánchez, Álvarez-García, de la Cruz del Río-Rama et al. 2018). There are two main types of religious tourism: (1) sightseeing tours to visit monuments, temples, museums; and (2) organized pilgrimage tours providing a visit to the world centers of religions, as well as travel to places having great significance in the genesis and dissemination of a particular religion. In the first case, people seek to become closer to their spiritual beliefs, to broaden their horizons and to gain new and more in-depth knowledge about the history of religion. The second type of tours are more likely to suit people travelling for spiritual motives, and their dream of worshipping in ancient shrines.

Spiritual tourism is becoming a major growth area of the Indian travel market with more Indians opting to go on a pilgrimage to popular religious cities such as Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh and Puri in Odisha. These include Puri (60% growth), which is famed for its Jagannatha Temple, Varanasi (48%), Tirupati in Andhra Pradesh (34%) and Shirdi in Maharashtra (19%). Travel Trends Today (2018) reported that, "Spiritual tourism is on the rise. Cities like Puri and Varanasi not only

offer travellers a traditional experience, but also enable them to rejuvenate at yoga retreats and Ayurveda spas”. The Ixigo study also looked at outbound train searches to these religious cities and found Lucknow topped the list with about 13%, followed by Mumbai (7%), Hyderabad (6%) and Delhi (5%).

Spiritual tourism is one of the biggest untapped markets for domestic travel of which nearly 60% of domestic tourism in India is religion based. To support this upcoming trend, the government has allocated special budgets for creating infrastructure around religious places. In Europe, the most visited religious tourist attraction is Notre-Dame de Paris, with 13 million visitors a year, and there are six other churches - Mont Saint-Michel, the Sacré-Coeur Basilica, and the cathedrals of Rheims, Chartres, Vézelay and Sainte-Chapelle which are among the 20 most visited places in France. In Europe today there are some half a million religious buildings (churches, temples, mosques, synagogues), most of which have a long history, a high-value heritage, and a rich artistic content (Future for Religious Heritage, 2014). Some of the most popular contemporary pilgrimage destinations are the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem and the Santiago de Compostela in Spain.

### **Does Tourism Have a Future in Uzbekistan?**

Several research studies have suggested that tourism in Uzbekistan has a bright future (Maidanovich, Abduvoisovna, Burxonovna, et al. 2019). This is partly because of recent initiatives by the State Committee for Tourism Development in Uzbekistan to initiate ambitious reforms to attract foreign tourists by relaxing visa restrictions; attracting private foreign investment, and to grant tax incentives for hotel and tourist services. In the writer’s opinion this is only the first stage in the development of tourism services in Uzbekistan. The second stage is to promote and to support the growth of several niche or special interest markets as a means of encouraging tourists to stay for a longer period of time, to spend more money, and to encourage repeat visitation.

### **Cultural Tourism**

One of the regions that has been ignored by many for its tourism potential until recently is Central Asia. Increased interest and historical studies by researchers from a variety of academic study areas of the direct trade route between China and Europe, termed the Silk Road (Airey & Shackley, 1997) has renewed its significance in global e-commerce and travel. Dating back to ancient civilizations, this region has been described as rich, interesting, and having a meaningful heritage, as well as offering a wide variety of rich cultural and heritage attractions (Kantarci, Uysal, and Magnini, 2014).

With its unique culture and natural attractions, Uzbekistan has gone to great efforts to preserve and promote its cultural legacy with many of their ancient architectural

monuments and mosques being preserved and restored. Twice the size of the UK, it has a rich cultural heritage and has a long history steeped in tradition.

### **Religious Tourism**

In Uzbekistan there are located many unique sacred places to worship for people whose religions are Islam, Christianity and Buddhism. These resources provide opportunities for further development of religious tourism in this area (Faranda & Nolle, 2011; Kantarci, 2007; UNWTO, 2012). This country has strong Islamic roots, with more than 160 historically important Muslim sites and many related to Sutism. These include the Mausoleum of Zangiata in Tashkent and the Bakhauddin Ensemble in Bukhara.

### **Adventure Tourism**

Ecological and adventure tourism in Uzbekistan is becoming more popular and distinct. There are eight state reserves (201.7 thousand hectares), three national parks (598.7 thousand acres), a biosphere reserve (68.7 thousand hectares), a natural wildlife breeding center (158.9 thousand hectares) and 10 natural monuments (3.7 thousand hectares). As a result, an increasing number of tour operators are now including sport, business and recreational tourism packages to diversify their tourism offerings, but it is still in the early stages of development (Baxtishodovich, et al., 2017). Airey and Shackley (1997) discussed the importance of special interest tours as far back as 1997. They mentioned that there is immense potential in developing formal trekking tourism based on the Himalayan model. In addition, they noted that some whitewater rafting and kayaking is popular on the Chatkal river, as well as bike tourism in the Tashkent area and Ferghana Valley, and rock climbing in the Fan mountains and caving in the karst areas of Boi-Bulok.

### **Gastronomy Tourism**

Gastronomy tourism is regarded as an emerging area of academic study and as a result, very few articles have been published in the databases that pertain to Uzbekistan. Most researchers have focused on the cultural and heritage attractions of Uzbekistan (Hasanovich, 2017). However, Xidirova and Turakulov (2019) have suggested the need to promote other types of tourism such as gastronomy tourism, because they felt that tourists limit themselves with visits to only historical and architectural monuments and that they need to experience gastronomic, natural and agri-tourism.

Abdovakhidova and Yunusova (2019) stated that gastronomy is an important element of Uzbekistan's local culture and identity, which has for past centuries

absorbed local traditions and different cultures, as well as its own culinary traditions. It is also regarded as one of the most savory and tasty cuisines in Central Asia. Abdurvakhidova et al. (2019) concluded that, “Food reveals the secret of the spirit of the people and helps to understand their mentality” (p. 150). Uzbek cuisine is regarded as one of the richest in the East, and shares the culinary traditions of Turkic people across Central Asia. Their major cities are located on the trade caravan routes of the Great Silk Road, and for many centuries Uzbekistan absorbed the most interesting and unusual dishes of different countries because of the fact that these Uzbek cities attracted a large number of merchants who arrived from Asia. Dishes from other nations have infiltrated into Uzbek cuisine, and many have evolved over the years into national dishes (Patterson & Tureav, 2020 (In Press)).

The different preparation of dishes which are identical in name, dates back to the ancient times of the Great Silk Road, when the mixture of traditions, new national dishes and spices turned each of the ancient cities into separate culinary regions. Every region in the Republic of Uzbekistan has its own specialties for the cooking of national dishes. The most famous dishes are plov, manti, dolma, hasip, lamb kebebs, somsa and famous bread from the tandoor. Overall, plov (or pilaf) is considered to be the most famous dish of Uzbekistan (Xidirova et. al (2019)).

### **Wine Tourism**

Vineyards in Uzbekistan account for approximately 127,000 hectares (wine and table grapes combined). Several varieties of grape have been introduced over the past years, which include European varieties such as Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Noir and Riesling. The best-known winery is Khamkor vineyard located about 100 km from Tashkent and encompassing 250 hectares which grows European varieties of grapes and exports to countries such as Japan, Russia, China, and Kazakhstan (Sommeliers International, 2015). Amonovna (2019) discussed several recommendations to encourage further development of wine tourism 1) Better roads and signage which would provide better direction for visitors travelling by car to wineries; and 2) To invest in the design and additional activities at the wineries such as hot air balloons, train tours, hiking, biking, participation in the cooking workshops and exhibitions, golfing, horseback riding, photo shoots in national costumes, wedding events, conferences, and open air events.

### **Conclusion**

It is becoming widely recognized that tourism, when built on broad stakeholder engagement and sustainable development principles, can substantially contribute to more inclusive growth through the provision of employment and economic development opportunities in both urban and rural areas. Cultural tourism accounts

for 37% of global tourism, is one of the largest and fastest growing global tourism markets, and has been used to increasingly market and promote a wide range of iconic destinations around the world. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, cultural tourism has become a major force in the economic and urban revitalization of major cities. This is because there is a growing awareness of the public's demand to preserve culture and heritage before it disappears.

The government of the Republic of Uzbekistan is attempting to raise global awareness about their cultural and heritage attractions through their recent tourism policies, to help protect and manage and protect outdoor natural areas, and to preserve their unique architectural monuments and mosques. The location of the area in the corridors on the Great Silk Road, with cities that were the main points of trade, make their destinations attractive for foreign tourists. The fact that UNESCO has included many of the unique architectural monuments and mosques in Uzbekistan on the list of World Heritage Sites makes the region a 'must visit' for tourists who have travelled widely, and are looking for new and exotic tourism experiences.

Thus, there is no doubt that visitors who have decided to travel to Uzbekistan in recent times are mainly interested in the cultural and historical attractions and generally undertake the most popular tours provided by the local travel agencies, i.e., Tashkent, Samarkand, Bukhara and Kiva. However, the most recent tourism statistics show that the majority of foreign tourists only come once to Uzbekistan, and generally for only one or two tours and stay for only a short amount of time. This should be a major concern for government and local tourism providers. Kapiki and Tarikulov (2014) warned that there was no guarantee that this small tourism flow that is arriving in Uzbekistan would not exhaust itself in a short amount of time.

If the government wants tourists to come for a longer time period and to encourage repeat visitations, it must also encourage and promote other niche tourism markets such as: adventure tourism, gastronomic and wine tourism and religious tourism which seem to be among Uzbekistan's best chances along with cultural tourism to achieve some long term economic and tourism stability and growth.

Uzbekistan still has a long way to go in its promotion of the tourism industry in an attempt to improve the national economy and to create new jobs. Previously, Uzbekistan was part of the Soviet Union and was largely dependent on its agricultural sector including the growing of cotton for its survival, and as a result, the standard of living was quite low for most people. However, since Uzbekistan seceded from the Soviet Union and became a Republic in 1991, one of the first major decisions of the government (in 1992) was to establish the first national tourism company, 'Uzbektourism'. This formed the basis for the establishment of the tourism industry as a major focus to assist in improving the economy.



Since 2016, the President has been a strong supporter of tourism as a means of economic revival through a number of ambitious reforms to encourage the growth of the tourism industry. Only time will tell how successful these measures will be in opening up the Republic to become a major tourist destination for Central Asia. It is hoped that this approach will provide a model for other countries to emulate so as to help raise the standard of living and quality of life of the citizens of Uzbekistan.

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