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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Need for Greater Diversification of Tourism Products in the Samarkand Region of Uzbekistan

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Abstract

Before the Covid pandemic, Samarkand, Uzbekistan was seen as an emerging, exotic tourist destination. This is because of the growing interest in its historical importance and cultural history which was strongly linked with the Great Silk Road. This region was included in a list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites under the name of "Samarkand-Crossroads of Cultures", and was attracting more foreign tourists each year because of its rich history, magnificent architecture, authentic culture and Islamic buildings. However, with the advent of the Covid pandemic, the tourism industry collapsed because its borders were closed to international tourists for a large part of 2020. Only recently, new measures have been implemented to attract international tourists and to make the Samarkand region the tourism hub of Uzbekistan once again. This study used a qualitative research design that involved interviewing 10 tourist operators to determine their opinions about the need for greater diversification of new tourism destinations, assessing their potential and determining the need for the further expansion of tourism development. As a result, several new niche tourism markets were identified that should be developed in order to appeal to different special interest segments of international and domestic tourists.

Keywords

tourism potential, tourist destination, tourism product diversification, niche tourism, special interest tourists; Samarkand Uzbekistan

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Introduction

Tourism is one of the most significant sectors of the world and has been growing rapidly, with the total number of international tourist arrivals reaching 1.4 billion in 2018, which was a 5% increase compared with 2017 (United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2019), and made up 10.4% of global GDP in 2018 (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2019). However, in February, 2020 the Covid-19 virus first appeared in Wuhan, China. After its emergence, the global situation changed as it negatively influenced all the international collaborations and relationships between countries. Tourism was one of the industries that suffered the most from the coronavirus pandemic, losing \$2.1 trillion and over 100 million jobs in the sector (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2020). The recovery and support for the tourism and hospitality industry after the pandemic has become a pivotal issue around the world, as many hot-spot destinations have suffered great financial losses.

Uzbekistan is best known for its historical and cultural attractions (Gonzalez, Rio, & Kim, 2016) of which 140 have been included in the UNESCO World Heritage List (Baxtishodovich, Suyunovich, & Kholiqulov, 2017). Its central location is on the Great Silk Road, which was a system of caravan routes established in ancient times connecting Asia with the Mediterranean and European worlds. Lonely Planet (n/d) writes: “The region’s cradle of culture for more than two millennia, Uzbekistan is the proud home to a spellbinding arsenal of architecture and ancient cities, all deeply infused with the bloody, fascinating history of the Silk Road. In terms of sights alone, Uzbekistan is Central Asia’s biggest draw and most impressive showstopper” (<https://www.lonelyplanet.com/uzbekistan>).

In Uzbekistan, the tourism market has become a major focus of the government since the country declared its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991 and became a republic. They adopted numerous decrees and laws that supported the development of the Uzbek tourism industry. The first was the creation of the national tourism company “Uzbektourism” by presidential decree in 1992 (Tuxliev, Hayitboyev, Safarov, et al. 2014). In 2016 the State Committee for Tourism Development was established by presidential decree. In 2017 another presidential decree supported the accelerated development of the tourism industry, to increase its role and share in the economy, its diversification and to improve the quality of tourist services and to expand tourism infrastructure. As a result, the numbers of foreign visitors increased substantially from 173,000 in 1996 (\$15 million, 0.11% of GNP), to 5.35 million visitors in 2018 (\$1.31 billion, 2.6% of GDP) (worlddata.info, 2018). Tourists stated that they were mainly attracted by the many unique architectural mausoleums, minarets and mosques in the ancient cities of Samarkand, Bukhara and Khiva; and chose a guided tour provided by local travel agencies (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Uzbekistan, 2020).

Although the numbers of international visitors have been gradually increasing, Uzbekistan is still regarded as a historical and cultural tourism destination, and is only visited for a short period of time. Tourism data collected in 2018-19 by the government shows that the majority of foreign tourists who arrived in Uzbekistan generally only undertook one standardized cultural tour program and stayed for a brief amount of time (average duration of stay was 6.9 days) (Tourism, Uzbekistan, 2018). Based on these findings, Kapiki and Tarikulov (2014) suggested that Uzbekistan needed to better utilize its tourism resources, as this has slowed down the process of more rapid development. Kapiki et al. (2014) warned that this should be a major concern for tourism providers as, "...there is no guarantee that this small tourism flow arriving in Uzbekistan will not exhaust itself in some time".

This lack of diversification of its tourism products is based on the fact that its tour operators and tourism agencies have been offering the same or similar cultural and historical tourism tours and products to international visitors for the past 30 years. All these tourism products have been contained within the historical and well-known cities of Uzbekistan - Samarkand, Bukhara, Khiva and Shakhrisabz. However, there are many other potential perspectives and tourism opportunities in other cities and regions of Uzbekistan that need to be developed, and will be further explored in this study.

Literature Review

Diversification of Tourism Products

The tourism industry has changed considerably over the last few decades, mainly because of the rapid developments in information technology, modernization of services, changes in tourist behavior and the emergence of new tourism destinations. This has resulted in tourism operators creating a variety of diverse tourism products and services to successfully run their businesses, and not lose their position in the international tourism market. Halavach and Rubakhau (2014) defined diversification as "A growth of the variety of products and services, a transition for new tourism products, an introduction of the new technologies and access to new markets to improve performance or reduce bankruptcy risk" (p. 26). Romão, Guerreiro, and Rodrigues (2017) stated that diversification strategies assist in protecting natural resources, which supports sustainable tourism development and boosts the link between tourism and other regional industrial sectors.

Weidenfeld (2018) examined the diversification of tourism at the product/market, regional and sectoral levels and stated that the product/market levels refer to all geographical levels from the individual firm to the international level. Benur and Bramwell (2015) indicated that primary tourism products are essential and their

diversification can be crucial for competitiveness and the sustainable development of destinations. Destinations need to understand the significance of providing diversified tourism products as this can diminish the risk and provide considerable benefits (Weaver & Lawton, 2006). Rotich and Kogola (2012) stated that diversification provides the sector with a broader stage that strengthens niche tourism types and hospitality activities. Additionally, Moraru (2011) believed that diversification has a positive effect on the competitive spirit of the tourism market and that internal competition between different tourism stakeholders may improve the quality and performance of services. Moreover, tourism product diversification may assist destinations to develop synergies and partnership links between tourism products that can help in improving destination flexibility and competitiveness (Benur, 2013).

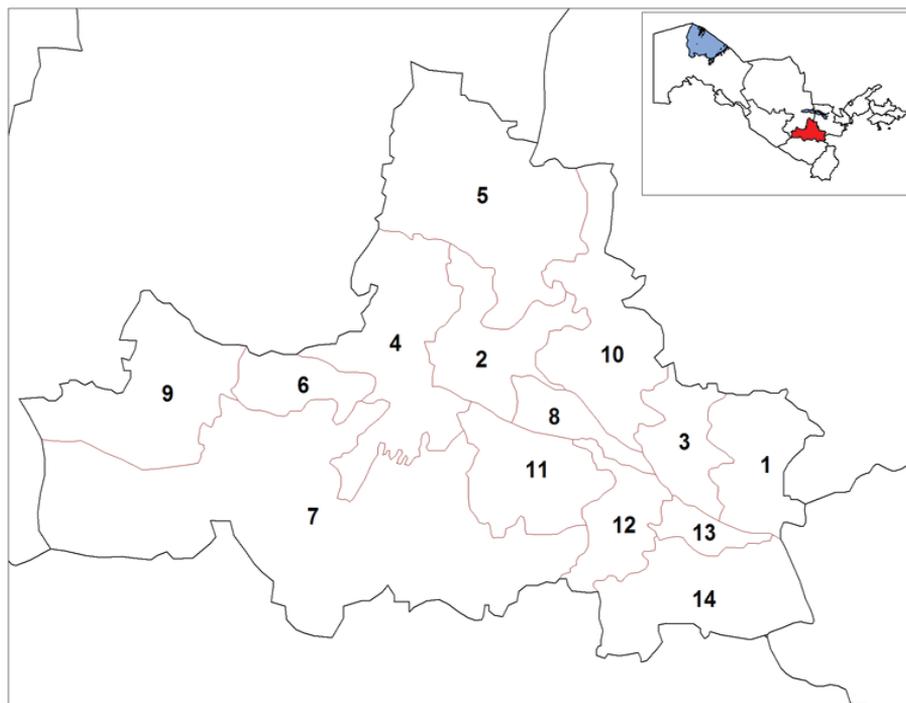
Tourist Destinations

According to Dickman (1999) a tourist destination refers to the five “A” components, which stand for, “attractions, access, accommodation, amenities, and activities”. Morachat (2003) stated that a tourist destination must have all of these elements to some degree although they need not be equally balanced or of the same quality and consistency for each potential destination. According to Popichit, Anuwichanont, Chuanchom, *et al.* (2013) the assessment of the destination’s potential helps to indicate and rate the importance of existing destination resources in each region or province. Each tourist destination must have its own unique tourism resources and attractions to appeal to tourists and to develop the tourism industry.

Tourist attractions can also play a vital role in the development of tourism in the regions. Harris and Howard (1996) defined a tourist attraction as a physical or cultural feature of a particular area that individual travelers or tourists perceive as capable of meeting one or more of their specific leisure-related needs. These features might be ambient in nature, such as climate, culture, vegetation or scenery, or they may be specific to a location such as a theater performance, a museum or a visit to a waterfall.

Samarkand Region

The Samarkand region is one of the well-known regions of Uzbekistan with its rich tourist potential, extensive history and cultural significance. The region is located in the center of the Republic of Uzbekistan in the Zarafshan valley. It is bordered by the Jizzakh region in the north-east, the Republic of Tajikistan in the east, the Kashkadarya region in the south and the Navoiy region in the west and north-west. The total area of the region is 16.77 square kilometers with a population of 3,813,600 people (in 2019). The region consists of four cities (Samarkand, Urgut, Aktash and Kattakurgan) and 14 districts (see Figure 1).



1. Bulungur 2. Ishtikhan 3. Djambay 4. Kattakurgan 5. Kushrabat 6. Narpay 7. Nurabad 8. Akdarya 9. Pakhtachi 10. Payarik 11. Pastdargam 12. Samarkand 13. Taylak 14. Urgut

Figure 1. Administrative-territorial division of the Samarkand region

In the Samarkand region there are 1,105 archeological, 670 architectural, 37 historical attractions, 18 monumental, and 21 memorial zones, totalling 1,851 tangible-cultural heritage objects (Gaibnazarova, 2018). Researchers have supported the need for greater diversification, “The Samarkand region is rich in tourism resources to develop cultural, sport, adventure, educational and eco-tourism” (Aslanova, Sattarova, & Alimova, 2016).

Niche or Special Interest Tourism

With the growing maturity of the global tourism market, a new trend has emerged, which is moving away from what has been termed ‘mass tourism’ or the more traditional forms of tourism development, now termed ‘overtourism’. These new markets are referred to as ‘special interest’ or ‘niche tourism’, which refers to the desire for travellers to seek out new and exotic tourism markets, especially the more experienced and highly engaged consumers. Wearing (2002) stated that the tourist in the 21st century is “searching for new and exciting forms of travel in defiance of a mass-produced product” (p. 243).

According to the World Tourism Organization, special interest tourism is defined as specialized tourism that involves individuals or groups of tourists who wish to develop their given interests, or to visit sites and places that have a strong connection with their specific interest or subject. Kruja and Gjyzezi (2011) stated that special interest tourism includes various travel activities and has become known as a niche market. This style of tourism has become more sustainable and participants of the special tourism market enjoy contact with nature, observing the flora and fauna of the destinations, exploring, discovering and overcoming obstacles and feeling the pleasure of overcoming them. The most common types of niche tourism markets are cultural and heritage tourism, gastronomy and wine tourism, adventure and nature-based tourism, sport tourism, religious tourism, rural tourism and medical tourism (Novelli, 2005).

Cultural and Heritage Tourism

According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization, cultural tourism is a type of tourism in which a traveler's main aim is to learn, discover, experience and consume tangible and intangible resources of the particular destination (UNWTO, n.d.). ECTARC (1989) stated that cultural tourism resources can involve archaeological places and museums, architecture (ruins, famous buildings, whole towns), art, sculpture, crafts, galleries, festivals, events, music and dance (classical, folk, contemporary), drama (theatre, films, dramatists), language and literature study, tours, events, religious festivals, pilgrimages, complete (folk or primitive) cultures and sub-cultures.

Cultural and heritage tourism is well developed in the Samarkand city center. The main and most well-known cultural and heritage tourism landmarks of the city are at Registan Square: the Amir Timur, Rukhabad, and Aksaray Mausoleums; the Bibikhonim and Khazrati Khizr mosques, the Mirzo Ulugbek Observatory and Museum, the Afrasiab Museum: State Museum of Culture History of Uzbekistan, the El-Merosi theater for historical costume, the Konigil ancient paper factory, the Chorsu Art Gallery, and the Samarkand Handicrafts Center are always crowded with foreign visitors in tourist seasons.

Gastronomy Tourism

According to The Committee on Tourism and Competitiveness (CTC) of UNWTO, gastronomy tourism is defined as a type of tourism activity that is characterized by tourists who experience food and related products and activities while travelling (CTC, Gastronomy and Wine Tourism, n/d). UNWTO reported that gastronomic activities include cookery workshops, visiting museums, food events, food fairs, visits to markets and food producers, food tours and other food related activities

(UNWTO, 2012). The term gastronomy tourism is now more commonly used rather than culinary tourism, tasting tourism or food tourism.

Gastronomy tourism in Samarkand is regarded as a new form of special interest tourism which the government has been paying close attention to over the past few years. Recently, a gastronomic area has been established in Orzu Mahmudov Street, where tourists are able to taste various kinds of food and drinks at the following restaurants - Brighton, Qanotcha, Lagman House, Evos, and Chopar Pizzeria. It will also organize gastronomic and food festivals in future years. The main food that attracts gastro tourists to Samarkand is plov (or pilaf) (consisting of lamb meat, carrot, and rice) and bean soup which have a long history and special preparation recipes.

Wine Tourism

Wine tourism is defined as the 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 main motivating factors for wine tourism consumers (Hall & Sharples, 2000). The main goal of tourists is to visit vineyards, wineries, to taste, consume and purchase wine which is usually near to the source (CTC of UNWTO, n.d.). According to Carmichael (2005), wine tourism refers to activities motivated by a tourist's desire to taste new wines and learn about the traditions and culture of wine-producing areas. Wine tourism products comprise bundles of activities, services and benefits that constitute experiences that require cooperation between tourism and agriculture to generate potential mutual benefits.

Samarkand's wine is considered as one of the best in the Central Asian region. This is facilitated by fertile soil, a mild climate and abundant sun. The region has great potential to further develop wine tourism. According to statistics, 564.3 thousand tons of grapes (38.7 thousand tons of grapes from the Taylak district. and 30.2 thousand tons of grapes from the Samarkand district were gathered from the Samarkand region in 2019) (Samarkand Regional Statistics department, 2019). The most popular wine tourism attraction in Samarkand is the Khovrenko wine tourism destination, which includes a winery and museum, and is the oldest wine factory in central Asia, and was established by the Russian merchant Filatov in 1868. Today, the winery has won over 80 International Awards producing several varieties of wine, brandy and vodka that can be tasted and purchased.

Sport Tourism

Sport tourism is widely defined as tourist travel to destinations for the primary purpose of participating in sport activities or related events (Standeven, 1998). There are many opportunities to develop sport tourism in the Samarkand region, especially

in the Nurabad and Pastdargam districts, which are famous and are ideal places for the national sport competition, Kupkari. In Kupkari, experienced horse-riders carry the body of a dead goat or sheep until they reach the finish line. Kupkari games are mainly held in autumn and spring, when Uzbek people celebrate a national holiday during “Navruz”. Equestrians prepare for the Kupkari competition in advance and carefully choose a strong, short horse of great endurance. The riders usually wear head protection, quilted cotton robes and pants to protect themselves against other competitor’s whips. The prizes for the Kupkari winner may be expensive appliances or a car.

Adventure and Nature-based Tourism

Kane (2002) stated that adventure tourism is defined and marketed as an experience of excitement, danger and risk. Contained in the understanding of risk is the potential of loss, injury and death. According to Adventure Travel Trade Association (ATTA) adventure tourism is defined as a trip that includes at least two of the following three elements: physical activity, natural environment, and cultural immersion (2013). Nature-based tourism can be broadly defined as the visitation to a natural destination which may be the venue for recreational activity where interaction with plants and animals is incidental, or the object of the visit to gain an understanding of the natural history of the destination and to interact with the plants and animals. There is a link between visitors involved in nature-based tourism activities and the natural environment (Wolf, Croft & Green, 2019).

There are many opportunities to develop adventure and nature-based tourism in the districts of the Samarkand region, since the region has great potential and resources for these types of tourism. One of the potential and attractive nature-based tourism resources of the region is Teshiktash rock. It is located between the village of Qoratepa in the Urgut district. This mysterious place has been an area of fascination for a long time. Under the influence of erosion and winds, a beautiful and charming work of art was created from the stone. When you look closely at the hole, you can see the heads of two dinosaurs colliding with each other. According to the Samarkand Department for Tourism Development, the mountain tourism cluster “Koratepa-Omonkutan” and tourism village “Tersak” in the Urgut district will be developed which is described as the best destination for adventure and nature-based tourism.

Religious Tourism

The most common definition of religious tourism refers to “...any kind of travel outside the usual environment for religious purposes” (Patterson & Turayev, 2020). Samarkand is visited by many Muslims every year who come from Malaysia, Indonesia, Iran, Turkey and other Muslim countries. The main destination for Muslim

travelers is the “Al Bukhariy” complex, which includes a mausoleum, museum and mosque. Imam al-Bukhari was a great theologian of the East who collected and recorded about 600 thousand hadiths – or legends based on cases of life or some sayings of the Prophet. The Al Bukhariy complex is regarded as a “Second Makkah” and is located in Payarik district, village of Hartang.

Rural or Agritourism

Rural communities see tourism as an opportunity to diversify the economy and to revitalize rural areas. Rural tourism can be defined as an experience in rural areas that includes a wide range of attractions and events which take place in agrarian or non-urban areas. The main features of rural tourism are wide-open spaces, slow tourism development, and chances for tourists to enjoy agricultural activities in natural surroundings (Irshad, 2010). These trends can be summarized as: 1) the stimulation of cultural heritage, folklore, traditions and a renewed interest in buildings and rural landscapes, and 2) health and well-being that is expressed through the pleasure associated with improved quality of life, air, water, and in eating in a healthy way (Ammirato & Felicetti, 2013). Rural tourism’s potential tour destinations are districts mostly based on agriculture, farming and fishing. The biggest agriculturally based districts of Samarkand regions are Urgut and Kattakurgan, followed by Payarik and Ishtikhan.

Aim of the study

The aim of this study is to establish the need for greater diversification of new niche tourism markets to improve the economic situation of new destinations that are located in the region of Samarkand, Uzbekistan.

Research Objectives

The following research objectives are based on gaps in the research literature:

1. To determine the tourism potential of different types of destinations in Samarkand and to determine how can they be promoted;
2. To assess the special characteristics of the tourism products to determine whether this will improve the economic circumstances of major stakeholders;
3. To investigate the need for a range of new tourism products to attract special interest international tourists so as to encourage them to visit for longer periods of time.

There are very few research studies that have been conducted on the need for the greater diversification of tourism products for this region based on their tourism potential. There is a need to explore the possibility of offering a more diverse range of tourism products and destinations according to their tourism potential in the 14 districts of the Samarkand region. It is anticipated that attracting tourists to districts and villages where tourism resources are located will have a positive influence on the economic resilience of the local population. In addition, by implementing strategies for the development of these new tourism niche markets, it is expected that tourists will want to stay longer in Uzbekistan and spend more money to support the local economy.

Methodology

A qualitative research methodology was selected as the most suitable means for collecting primary data because it provides a rich description, by the use of semi-structured face to face interviews of experienced tour operators in Samarkand. The research questions were designed to examine the tourism potential of various destinations, and to ascertain the need for greater diversification of tourism products. Because of the numerous lockdowns and travel restrictions due to the coronavirus pandemic, the number of international tourists visiting Uzbekistan had decreased to a trickle, making it impossible to use a quantitative methodology, as it was impossible to achieve a high enough sample size with the collection of large numbers of survey questionnaires.

Sample

Samples in qualitative research tend to be small in order to support the depth of analysis that is fundamental to this mode of inquiry. Qualitative samples are also purposive, that is, they are selected based on their capacity to provide in-depth information that is relevant to the phenomenon under investigation (Vasileiou, Barnett, et al., 2018). A total of 10 tour operators were selected by a snowball sampling technique to identify potential interviewees who might be interested in being interviewed. By this method, the interviewers recruit future subjects based on referrals by their friends and acquaintances (Berg, 2014). This is a non-probability sampling technique that is used when it is difficult to obtain other travel agents to agree to be interviewed. This may have been because potential respondents were fearful about speaking out against government policy.

Data Collection

The method used was individual, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews. In tourism research, this method of interviewing is the most popular for gaining an in-

depth understanding of a topic where differences in perception, attitudes, impacts, behaviors and practices are important (Picken, 2017). Face-to-face interviewing allows more detailed questions to be asked and allows the researcher to re-word questions if they are not understood. Furthermore, the researcher is able to detect and analyze the interviewee's body language when asking the questions.

The semi-structured interview uses open-ended questions that are prepared in advance. According to Hancock (2002), "Semi-structured interviews tend to work well when the interviewer has already identified a number of aspects that he wants to be sure of addressing" (p. 10). This saves time and helps to reduce discussion about irrelevant topics. The interviews were recorded on the researcher's mobile phone after written permission was provided by the interviewee.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is the process of reducing a considerable amount of information to make sense of it. According to Patton (1987) three things happen during the data analysis stage: the collected data is organized, data is then reduced through summarizing and categorizing, and patterns and themes in the data are determined and connected. Unlike quantitative data, qualitative data refers to collecting non-numeric information, including interview tapes and transcripts, taking notes, and video and audio recordings. The data analysis process for this research began by analyzing the gathered data using an inductive content analysis to identify common themes (Galanis, 2018). Firstly, the researchers began by transcribing the interviews from the tape recordings to computer files, then reading and examining the written transcripts. Secondly, after reading the collected data, common and similar responses and themes were highlighted and grouped into major and minor themes according to their relationships with each other. By coding and sorting the data in this manner, the researchers were able to compare different 'pieces' of data relating to each question and to separate them into different file folders for further analysis. A frequency count of various key words or categories was then conducted to determine the significance (Miles & Huberman, 1994). All findings are presented in the next section in a de-identified form with pseudonyms used throughout to ensure the anonymity of the study respondents.

Interview Questions

In order to maintain consistency between the research objectives and the data, 10 interview questions were written to guide the interview process. These questions related to the themes associated with tourist attractions, destination potential and the diversification of tourism products. The following questions were developed and used in the interviews:

1. Could you compare the tourism industry of the Samarkand region before and after the coronavirus pandemic?
2. How has COVID-19 affected your business?
3. Are there sufficient tourist attractions or products in the Samarkand region to develop the niche tourism market and to attract special interest tourists?
4. Is there an appropriate mix or diversity of tourist attractions and products in the Samarkand region, have they improved in the past ten years, and why do you think that?
5. Do you have any plans or strategies to broaden the mix or diversity of tourist attractions and products in the Samarkand region, and, if so, what are these plans?
6. Are there any differences in the tourist attractions and products in the Samarkand region that are visited by international tourists as compared with domestic tourists? If so, what are the differences?
7. Which are the main tourist attractions and products in the Samarkand that are often included in packages put together by tour operators?
8. Does Samarkand have a clear and coherent image as a tourist destination, and if yes/no why do you think that?
9. Based on your experience what features of the tourist attractions and products in Samarkand are tourists most satisfied with?
10. Do the tourist attractions and products effectively provide maximum economic returns and jobs for local people in Samarkand?

Results

Profile of the Respondents

To collect the required data, individual interviews were conducted with experienced tour operators (n=10) who all had been working in the tourism and hospitality industry for at least the past three years. The interviews included 6 males and 4 females whose average age was 28 years. Because many had had previous jobs as tour guides, they were able to provide knowledge about the tourism potential of the Samarkand region and tourist satisfaction levels during their trips. All respondents had a high level of education, having received their academic degrees either at Samarkand Institute of Economics and Service, or Samarkand State Institute of Foreign Languages. The interviewees did not want to provide their names and places of work, preferring to

remain anonymous. Thus, the names of the respondents were replaced with the use of pseudonyms to ensure the anonymity of the study respondents (see Table 2).

Table 1
Socio-Demographic Profile Of The Respondents

Name	Age	Sex	Current Occupation	Previous job	Educational level	Graduated Higher Educational Institutions
Tom	31	M	Tour operator	Tour agent	Higher degree	Samarkand Institute of Economics and Service
Tina	26	F	Tour operator	Tour guide	Higher degree	Samarkand State Institute of Foreign Languages
Alice	25	F	Tour operator	Interpreter	Higher degree	Samarkand State Institute of Foreign Languages
Baxter	28	M	Tour operator	Tour guide	Higher degree	Samarkand Institute of Economics and Service
Jessica	27	F	Tour operator	Tour guide	Higher degree	Samarkand State Institute of Foreign Languages
Emily	26	F	Tour operator	Tour guide	Higher degree	Samarkand State Institute of Foreign Languages
John	23	M	Tour operator	Tour guide	Higher degree	Samarkand Institute of Economics and Service
Simon	32	M	Tour operator	Teacher	Higher degree	Samarkand Institute of Economics and Service
David	34	M	Tour operator	Tour guide	Higher degree	Samarkand Institute of Economics and Service
Benjamin	27	M	Tour operator	Tour guide	Higher degree	Samarkand Institute of Economics and Service

Themes that Emerged

After categorizing the data, four major themes emerged and were labeled as the following: (1) Collapse of the industry because of COVID-19 pandemic, (2) Growth in domestic tourism, (3) Challenges and opportunities to develop niche tourism market, and

(4) The lack of diversity in tourism products and attractions.

Theme 1. Collapse of the tourism industry of Samarkand because of the COVID-19 pandemic

The negative effects of COVID-19 for the tourism and hospitality industry were felt across the whole world. Due to the pandemic and strict lockdowns, international flights between countries were cancelled and borders were closed, which were antecedents for the collapse of the tourism industry. As the leading tourist destination of Uzbekistan, Samarkand had attracted thousands of tourists from all over the world before the pandemic. Tom (aged 31) stated, “*Samarkand was the leading city amongst Central Asian cities in international tourist arrivals in 2018 and at the beginning of 2019*”. David (aged 34) focused on the economic growth of the industry before the effects of the virus, “*Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the flow of tourists*

in Samarkand region was great. The income of most tour firms had been increasing and they had been working hard to attract more and more tourists to Samarkand”.

However, after the pandemic, the situation changed and the whole tourism industry of Samarkand began to collapse. Tina (aged 26) stated, *“The unexpected appearance of the coronavirus affected all spheres, and the most damaged sphere was tourism. Because restrictions on travelling and the closing of borders, even movement between regions and cities negatively influenced the tourism industry”.* John (aged 23) stated that he was more concerned about people who were working in the tourism sphere, *“...tour guides, tour drivers, tour operators had nothing to do. Overall, it resulted in a huge financial loss for the people who worked in the tourism industry”.* Jessica (aged 27) agreed when she stated, *“Most people became unemployed. I know some professional guides who changed their professions as they had no choice”.*

Theme 2. Growth in domestic tourism

As international tourism came to a standstill to prevent the spread of the virus, tour operators were forced to change their focus from foreign tourists to domestic tourists in order to maintain their business and to maintain a regular income. Tina (aged 26) stated, *“After the pandemic, it became difficult for Uzbekistan to redevelop international tourism, but Uzbekistan was paying closer attention to developing domestic tourism, and the government was focusing on helping tour organizations and tourism stakeholders by lowering taxes and allocating subsidies”.* Jessica (aged 27) also stated, *“After the pandemic, thanks to God, we are working with domestic tourists, as we had fewer tourists from Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan”.* Emily (aged 26) thought that the pandemic also had a positive effect: *“After the regional lockdowns were opened, more and more people were eager to travel and started travelling, and Samarkand offered up to 50% discounts for their services, which assisted in attracting a large number of domestic tourists who were encouraged to visit”.* John (aged 23) also supported the idea of the development of domestic tourism after the pandemic when he stated: *“Domestic tourism didn’t affect us so badly; because there were no foreign tourists, the costs of transportation and entrance fees for locals decreased, and different kinds of discounts were offered”.*

Theme 3. Major challenges and opportunities to develop the niche tourism market

Almost all respondents stated that Samarkand had adequate tourism resources and attractions to develop special interest tourism and to attract new tourist segmentations. Moreover, they thought that the development of the niche tourism market was pivotal for Samarkand to become a world tourism destination. Baxter (aged 24) stated, *“We have all the opportunities to develop niche tourism. Unique architectural monuments included in the UNESCO cultural heritage list, delicious*

cuisine (legendary Samarkand bread and pilaf), and hospitality of the people have attracted and will continue to attract tourists. Guests are more and more interested in getting some kind of special experience, in unusual visits, they want to diversify in choosing excursions to interact with the local population, to be engaged in cultural traditions and customs”.

Furthermore, many of the respondents thought that Samarkand had the potential to develop nature-based tourism, including ecological and mountain-based tourism. Benjamin (aged 27) stated, *“We have eco-tourism resources and nature-based tourism resources which are still new for tourists and even for some local tour operators”.* Tina (aged 26) also agreed when she stated, *“We have enough resources to develop nature-based tourism, such as hiking, fishing and picnicking”.* Several also shared their experiences about niche tourism. Alice (aged 25) stated, *“We organize tours not only across the city but also to the mountains, and arrange trekking tours with tour guides where tourists can spend nights in the mountains.”*

However, several respondents stated that there were major problems which were main obstacles to developing a niche tourism market in the Samarkand region. Tina (aged 26) stated, *“The lack of infrastructure and the similarity of tourism products, the lack of eagerness to learn and investigate new attractions and destinations are the major problems in developing special interest tourism”.* Simon (aged 32) also added his perspective regarding the difficulties in developing the niche tourism market, *“The main problem which is a great obstacle is the infrastructure and lack of facilities to develop special interest tourism. The level of service sphere for a niche tourism market is also very poor”.*

Theme 4. The lack of diversity in tourism products and attractions and strategies to diversify them

There was general agreement that the tourism products of Samarkand that were usually offered to foreign tourists were very similar. Jessica (aged 27) agreed when she said, *“Each tour firm offers the same products, which are usually tours around historical monuments”.* Emily (aged 26) supported this, *“I think there is no diversification in tourism attractions and products in the Samarkand region because most of them are historical monuments and are specialized for historical tourism”.*

In spite of the similarity in tourism products, most respondents agreed that there was a need to diversify tourism products and several shared their future plans regarding the development of specific types of tourism, and specifically nature-based tourism. Tina (aged 26) stated, *“I am going to focus on active forms of tourism, especially nature-based and mountain tourism.”* Jessica (aged 27) also stated, *“We are working on developing ecological and sustainable tourism. We are taking*

tourists to the mountains of the Urgut district...the interest of domestic tourists to visit eco-destinations is increasing these days". Simon (aged 32) also supported the development of nature-based tourism, "Our plan is to develop nature-based tourism, including rural tourism, agritourism, mountain tourism and ecotourism".

Discussion Of Results

Research Question 1: What is the tourism potential of different types of destinations in Samarkand, and how can they be promoted?

Samarkand is a well-known tourist location with its historical-architectural monuments that have attracted international tourists for many years. Interviews conducted with tour operators indicated that before the pandemic, Samarkand had been a leading tourism destination with great potential, attracting a considerable flow of tourists from different parts of the world. During the interviews, the majority of tour operators agreed that the tourism potential of Samarkand was its architectural heritage, including Registan Square, the Amir Temur mausoleum, Bibikhanum mosque, Shakhi Zinda complex, Khazrati Khizr mosque and Khoja Doniyor mausoleum. Gaibnazarova (2018) stated that in the Samarkand region there are 1,851 tangible-cultural heritage objects, including 1,105 archeological, 670 architectural, 37 historical attractions, 18 monumental, and 21 memorial zones. According to Khusenova and Rakhmonov (2018), 37.7 % of tourism resources in Uzbekistan are situated in the Samarkand region. However, The Minister for Tourism and Sport, Aziz Abduhakimov, further stated that only 5% of the tourism potential of Samarkand is actually used (The Tashkent Times, 2021). These figures support the tourism potential of Samarkand region which is centered around tangible-cultural heritage objects.

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in international tourism drying up, creating a new focus on domestic tourism to help mitigate the negative influence of this virus. Most of the respondents stated that after the easing of quarantine measures in Samarkand, tourist attractions were mainly visited by local people. This change in emphasis was supported by a presidential decree on May 28, 2020 which stated: "Urgent measures are needed to support the tourism sector to reduce the negative effects of the coronavirus pandemic." This helped to restart domestic tourism, as "green" and "yellow" zones were created to revitalize the activities of tour operators, tour agents, accommodation facilities, and cultural-heritage objects. These opportunities were aimed at supporting domestic tourists to travel around the Samarkand region once again.

Another factor that encouraged domestic tourism in the Samarkand region was support from the Samarkand Regional Department for Tourism Development, when they announced a "tourism month" from the 15th of December, 2020 until the 15th

of January 2021. This resulted in 117 accommodation facilities, 50 tour operators, 10 transport companies, 48 restaurants and all cultural-heritage sites in the region offering up to 50% discounts. This attracted thousands of people to Samarkand from other regions of Uzbekistan. As a result of this initiative, 42,400 people from different cities and districts, and 60,100 people from regional areas of the country visited Samarkand in one month (Press service of Samarkand Regional Department for Tourism Development, 2021).

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) concluded that domestic tourism had softened the negative effects of COVID-19, and many governments took prompt actions to revive and re-activate the tourism industry to protect jobs and businesses related to the tourism sector. However, as the OECD (2020) stated, “the real recovery will only be possible when international tourism returns. This requires global co-operation and evidence-based solutions so travel restrictions can be safely lifted” (p. 5). However, in spite of the lower income that was generated from domestic tourism, this form of tourism was the only source of income for many tourism stakeholders in Samarkand during the pandemic.

Research Question 2: What are the special characteristics of Uzbekistan’s tourism products, and how can they improve the economic circumstances of major stakeholders?

This study has demonstrated that there is a relationship between the diversification of tourism products and strategies to diversify them. Almost all of the tour operators of Samarkand stated that the tour products of the region were similar; that is, they are based on historical and cultural tours and this is a pivotal issue that needed to be addressed as soon as possible to improve the economic conditions of Samarkand. Bacher (2005) stated that diversification strategies contribute to the growth of the economy and can improve current economic difficulties. Generally, diversification measures are used to increase profits, reduce costs, decrease risks and to develop new markets. According to Zigern-Korn and Olga (2018) tourism destinations need to diversify their tourism products to help contribute to the further development of the region and to assist destinations to explore their tourism potential.

Most respondents stated that one of the best and most appropriate ways of diversifying the tourism products of the Samarkand region was to support the development of nature-based tourism activities, especially hiking, trekking, fishing, rafting and other eco-tourism activities. According to many of the tour operators, nature-based tourism could be developed in the Urgut district of the Samarkand region, thanks to the imminent establishment of the Koratepa-Omonkuton mountain tourism cluster in the Urgut district, and Tersak village, also in the Urgut district, will officially become a tourism village (Samarkand Regional Department for Tourism

Development, 2021). In addition, \$2 million have been allocated to improve tourism facilities, and tourism and recreational zones will be established near the Koraep water reservoir in the Urgut district (Xalq so'zi, 2021). These strategies are planned to help diversify tourism products, to prolong tourists' length of stay in Samarkand, and to create more job opportunities for local people at the destination.

Most of the respondents stated that tourism products and their diversification provided local people with job opportunities and brought extra revenue to destinations. Additionally, diversification may improve the competitiveness of these destinations and reduce seasonality issues (Dwyer and Kim, 2003; Lopez and Garcia, 2006). Benur (2015) stated that diversification of tourism products is vital to strengthen the economic flexibility of destinations.

Research Objective 3: To investigate the need for a range of new tourism products to attract special interest international tourists so as to encourage them to visit for longer periods of time.

Comments from various tour operators suggest that Samarkand has many opportunities to attract a variety of tourists, and to develop a niche tourism market by using tourism resources to create new tourism products. However, most respondents stated that there were major problems that restricted the niche tourism market in Uzbekistan. These included: a lack of suitable infrastructure facilities at tourism destinations; a lack of eagerness to learn and investigate new tourism attractions; insufficient allocation of money by the government; and a lack of advertising and promotion of tourism resources and destinations. Studies have supported the challenges that are associated with developing a new niche tourism market. According to McKercher and Robbins (1998) the process of developing a niche tourism market is difficult and this requires a high level of marketing knowledge which small tourism firms and agencies generally do not have.

A majority of operators expressed the desire to develop rural and agritourism in the Samarkand region, and several indicated that they had already begun to offer rural tourism products, such as trips to the Kushrabat district of the Samarkand region. Park and Yoon (2009) found that there were a number of distinguishable micro niches associated with rural tourism. These include participating in not only rural tourism but also agritourism, recreational tourism and cultural tourism. In addition, tourists were able to spend two days with a local family living in culturally-decorated accommodation, work as locals on farms and spend time visiting health clinics and spas. According to Irshad (2010): "Rural tourism is not just farm-based tourism. It includes farm-based holidays but also comprises special interest nature holidays and ecotourism, walking, climbing and riding, adventure, sport and health tourism, hunting and angling, educational travel, arts and heritage tourism, and, in some areas,

ethnic tourism” (p. 2). This suggests that rural tourism is a potential tourism market for Samarkand which can be developed in districts of the region through the addition of various tourism activities such as wine tasting, working in the fields, and feeding animals which are perfect activities for families with young children who may never have seen a working farm before.

Conclusion

When considering the themes that have been developed, it can be concluded that Samarkand has a great deal of potential to further develop the tourism sphere. Although the tourism industry in this region had been rapidly developing before the pandemic, the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic totally changed the situation for the tourism industry. This was because very few international tourists visited Samarkand during 2020, due to global travel restrictions and lockdowns. As a result, many tour agencies and hotels closed and employees lost their jobs and suffered from a lack of income, resulting in many being forced to change their jobs. Additionally, shopkeepers who usually sold handmade souvenirs, cultural handicrafts, national fabrics and traditional cloths to tourists also suffered from the effects of the pandemic through the loss in income.

The government of Uzbekistan has attempted to provide some support to the tourism industry during the pandemic by allowing tour operators and tour firms/agencies to organize domestic tours in “green” and “yellow” zones where the spread of coronavirus was lower or with fewer cases of the disease reported. Zumrad and Amiov (2020) stated that it was necessary to support domestic recreational tourism, so that internal flows could compensate for the absence of foreign tourists. Soon the positive effects of domestic tourism began to be seen in the Samarkand region with the local government announcing “tourism months” during the pandemic and offering up to 50% discounts on many tourism services, resulting in thousands of domestic tourists visiting the Samarkand region. In Samarkand, domestic tourism was regarded as the “saver” of the tourism industry of Samarkand and prevented its total collapse.

The findings from this research support the importance of diversifying the tourism sector, in order to encourage tourists to stay longer in this region. A lack of diversity in tourism products was stated as the main reason for the short stay of tourists as no other types of tourism services, programs or excursions were offered. Some attempts have been made by the government to initiate new types of nature-based and rural tourism, but these have been minimal. Samarkand has many opportunities to develop other niche tourism markets such as wine tourism, gastronomy tourism, MICE tourism, sport tourism and recreation tourism. It was stated that, “Samarkand is

astonishing not only with its ancient mosques, mausoleums and madrassas but also with its wine. On this blessed land under the scorching rays of the sun grow different varieties of grapes, which by their sweetness surpass their global counterparts” (Wine tasting at the old winery, 2020).

However, problems associated with diversification are a lack of finance, inadequate infrastructure for getting to tourism facilities and the unpopularity of many destinations due to a lack of promotion. The development of tourism in a particular region requires a great deal of improvement in the existing infrastructure which requires an increased amount of investment resources (OECD, 2020). Therefore, the economic importance and level of development of tourism in a region is determined by the availability of greater financial resources. Therefore, the government needs to allocate more money to improve tourism infrastructure and the facilities of these potential destinations.

Limitations

Overall, there is a lack of literature about niche tourism resources in Samarkand, and this was a major obstacle in determining new niche tourism attractions, and analyzing the tourism potential of Samarkand. Another limitation was linked to the sample size and the method of sampling, in which a small number of experienced tour operators were interviewed using a purposive sample. The sample size was small and a larger sample would have helped to increase the validity of the responses. Furthermore, because of the pandemic, many tour operators were not interested in being interviewed, resulting in the researchers having to use a snowball sampling technique to collect the primary data.

Recommendation for further research

In the future, there is a need to expand the case study area to identify further niche tourism markets not only in Samarkand, but also in other cities of Uzbekistan, such as Bukhara, Khiva and Tashkent. This would assist tourism providers to increase the number of visitations and to prolong the overnight stays of international visitors, especially for special interest tourists.

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