

# Leveraging Cultural Tourism for socio-economic Development in Uzbekistan: Innovative Products and Services

## Key Messages

- As the growth of tourism in the country is slowed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the sector could benefit from increasing people's connections to their national, ethnic, and regional cultural heritage.
- This cultural connection allows people to link their heritage to livelihoods including products and events to support their households and contribute to the economy.
- After recovery from COVID-19, it will be more important that the public sector needs a coordinated, holistic approach for tourism to thrive. National policies must grant local communities decision-making authority to create tourism-sustained economies over the long-term.
- The private sector, including community, national and international stakeholders, must drive tourism with innovation and investment

Before the COV-19 crisis, Uzbekistan and Central Asia were on the rise as an international tourist destination, showing strong potential for further development under the common brand of the *Great Silk Road*<sup>1</sup>. The travel website *Lonely Planet* named Uzbekistan a premiere travel region in the world for 2020. This is attributable to significant, calculated government reforms, increasing accessibility over the past two years. In 2018, the number of visitors to the country doubled to 5.3 million with a further increase of 20% last year<sup>2</sup>. Uzbekistan has a rich cultural heritage, displaying untouched history with 7000

historical and architectural sites, including several UNESCO World Heritage Sights.<sup>3</sup>

However, merely visiting heritage sites doesn't create wealth and development for communities and the country. Expats sometimes view that despite the rich heritage of the country, barriers to strengthening the tourism economy remain. From communication with visitors, we learned that, apart from the major historical cities of Samarkand and Bukhara, people's knowledge of the physical and cultural heritage in Uzbekistan is limited. Developing this facet of Uzbekistan's history would increase country's visibility in the global tourist market and speed the recovery of the sector. The aim of this policy brief is to highlight the range of cultural offerings and their potential links to specific economic sectors.

## Categories of Cultural Tourism and Their Applications for Branding Uzbekistan as a Destination

**Cultural Tourism Products:** An effective mix of culture and tourism results in many interrelated products often divided into two categories: tangible and intangible. Tangible products include lodging and material services supporting tourism. Intangible products, on the other hand, are associated national heritage, history, traditions and other cultural aspects driving tourists' interest in an area. According to recent trends, intangibles have the greatest influence on tourists and their choices of destinations.<sup>4</sup> When basic conditions of leisure are present, tourists begin to

<sup>1</sup> <https://worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2017/10/31/central-asia-tourism-a-driver-for-development>

<sup>2</sup> <https://uzbektourism.uz/en/research;https://euractiv.com/section/central-asia/news/uzbekistan-announces-ambition-to-become-a-major-tourist-destination/>

<sup>3</sup> Musaev, H. H. (2017). Tourism in Uzbekistan: opportunities and new challenges. *European science review*, (1-2), 264-267.

<sup>4</sup> OECD (2009), 'The Impact of Culture on Tourism', Maastricht University, [http://fasos.maastrichtuniversity.nl/profiles/Ev-ans/OECD\\_Tourism\\_Culture.pdf](http://fasos.maastrichtuniversity.nl/profiles/Ev-ans/OECD_Tourism_Culture.pdf)

look for symbolic value available within a given place, often driven by ideas, events or famous people the place evokes.<sup>5</sup> This suggests the importance of designing the image and branding of the country and regions since, “perception is the reality” influencing tourists’ choices.

Following this line of thought, we suggest intangible products for development below.<sup>6</sup>

### **Spiritual Tourism**

Uzbekistan ranked 29th in the world on the Global Muslim Travel Index in 2017.<sup>7</sup> The country boasts remarkable sites linked with the development of several world religions including Islam, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism and Christianity.

The nation is home to medieval Sufi mansions in Bukhara, the holy sheikh Bakhouddin Naqshbandi and the mausoleums of Al-Bukhari, Shakhi-Zinda and Rukhabad in Samarkand, all relevant to the global tourist market.

Buddhist monasteries in Fayaz-Tepe and Kara-Tepe, local temples in Dalverzin-Tepe, and Zoroastrian monuments in Ayaz-Kala, Toprak-Kala and Termez, provide significant points of interest to attract spiritual tourists from different faiths and beliefs.

### **Art and Museums**

The ex-soviet influence on the country has resulted in a vibrant art scene with artists presenting remarkable creations linking traditional ideas with modern techniques. The country has 110 different museums. The Ministry of Culture and Sports of the Republic of Uzbekistan supervises 98 of them, including branches of the state museums. These include one of the most famous museums in Central Asia: the Savitsky museum of Art in Nukus, housing the second largest collection of Russian *avant-garde* material in the world. The Art Gallery of Uzbekistan in Tashkent exhibits a remarkable collection of pre and postindependence Uzbek painters. It effectively displays art by regions, highlighting places like Bukhara and its thriving arts community during Soviet times.

### **Theater and Music**

Central Asia is home to centuries-old musical traditions. Uzbekistan is densely steeped in a rich heritage of music and performance. The continued

celebration and practice of such arts in the present-day interests both enthusiasts and academics alike, who appreciate performing artists in local cultural events, including festivals, storytelling, dance, and theater. Such performances are filled with elaborate costume design and intricate decoration, many of which celebrate regional identity and pride. The historic Alisher Navoiy Theater (1929) houses the State Opera and Ballet and itself is an iconic landmark for Uzbekistan satisfying tourist interests from both its architecture and performances. Another unique theater, the Ilkholm (1976), promotes a range of *avant-garde* music and drama performances for the city. Smaller venues, throughout the regions, highlighting music and performance. With stronger branding, these cultural centers will attract more visitors and boost their reputations. They can become important stops along a diverse tourist route.

### **Eco-Tourism**

Uzbekistan boasts a rich and diverse landscape mostly unknown to foreign tourists. A myriad of National Parks, rich in rare or unique flora and fauna and relatively unexplored geological formations hold untapped potential for growth. As noted by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), eco-tourism is a fast growing trend in international travel and holiday-making. The idea of eco-tourism has already been used effectively to promote areas of the country to travelers interested in preserving natural environments. For instance; the *Stibia* electronic music festival, organized in Moynaq, a former coastal city along the Aral Sea, has brought identity and tourism to an unknown location. Now an annual event, it attracts people who wish to view this environmental tragedy and reach out to a global audience by raising awareness of the results of people mismanaging natural resources.<sup>8</sup>

Other developments in adventure tourism include a new ski resort built to European standards, complementing existing infrastructure. Guide services for adventure tourists are increasing<sup>9</sup> but continue to be informal, lacking certification, or training on skills needed to conduct effective and safe trips. The government of Uzbekistan has ambitiously promotes eco-tourism to further boost skiing, sports and leisure in resorts.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>5</sup> UNWTO (2018), “Tourism and Culture Synergies”. Madrid: World Tourism Organization

<sup>6</sup> CAREC (2019), “Promoting Regional Tourism Cooperation under CAREC 2030. A Scoping Study”, Manila: Asian Development Bank; <http://dx.doi.org/10.22617/TCS190047-2>

<sup>7</sup> <https://crescentrating.com/reports/mastercard-crescentrating-global-muslim-travel-index-gmti-2017.html>

<sup>8</sup> <http://stibia-festival.org/en>

<sup>9</sup> The increase is largely credited to national tourism operators who see this as a new market opportunity.

<sup>10</sup> Sobirov, B. (2018). “The concept of the tourist economic zone. Case of Uzbekistan.” *World Scientific News*, 98, 34-45.

## Textile and Lifestyle Products

Uzbekistan's cultural riches produces an extensive variety of lifestyle products. The nation and its cultures are found in the unique diverse designs of Uzbek fabrics. For example, Khan-Atlas is on the UNESCO cultural heritage list, displaying regional pride through ornaments typical of Central Asia's nomadic peoples. These motifs adorn the colorful embroidery of *suzani* tapestries, decorating handbags and different clothes alongside local furs. Hats, notably the *tubeteika* skullcaps, are of particular importance and interest since every region of Uzbekistan presents its own style of headwear. Across history the Uzbek weaving masters in the Fergana Valley have developed particular thread weaving techniques, turning Margilan silk into one of the most desirable fabrics on earth. Considering the capacity for textile production already present in Uzbekistan, culture-related fashion has a great potential. These fashions create international interest through a "Made in Uzbekistan" brand while also contributing to the continued formation of the Central Asian Silk Road image.

### Handicrafts.

People visiting such an "exotic" region as Central Asia, are willing to spend more on local products, services and experiences, when they spontaneously buy them in their place of origin.<sup>11</sup> International travel, by its nature, encourages visitors to buy local crafts and art.

Some noteworthy handicrafts include ceramics and pottery from Khiva; *suzani* textile embroidery from Shakhrisabz ; wood carving from Tashkent; silk carpets from Samarkand; Khan atlas from Margilan, golden embroidery from Bukhara; and, knives and skull caps from Chust. The uniqueness attached to these kinds of products increases a visitors' willingness to spend more on them when in their place of origin. The regional and cultural diversity across the country therefore provides ample opportunity for income generation through location specific wares and goods. Not only does local music, live or recorded, provide an interesting takeaway experience for tourists, but a market for replica or miniaturized versions of traditional instruments such as a *kobyz*. Uzbek tourist centers showcase traditional artisan workshops whose handmade pottery, silk carpets, *suzani*, jewelry, forged products, and costumes form the original national wealth of the Uzbek people. An obvious and strong rationale for investing in branding, marketing, and promoting these key products. This can apply, in particular, to products associated with symbolic ideas,

ritual objects or inspired by noteworthy historical figures such as Alexander the Great. Sale and promotion of such wares should revolve around the products regional origins and direct connections with local identity.

## Gastronomy and Culinary Heritage

The kitchen may be the heart of cultural tourism as, for a tourist, food often represents the literal and figurative *first taste of another culture*. As an agricultural country, Uzbekistan heralds rich traditions of regional and local ethno-gastronomic fair reflecting the essence of Uzbek culture. The country presents a varied and deep range of meat, spices, dried fruits and nuts, fruits and vegetables, all of notable quality. Flavors drawn from traditional spice combinations and quality of food sources shape a tourists' experience. The hospitality Uzbekistan is famous for, makes complements its delicious food.

Due to the sheer variety of quality foods and drinks produced in Uzbekistan there is incredible capacity for developing agriculture in ways that promote gastro-tourism and capitalize on long growing season and favorable environmental conditions.

This idea can be applied, in particular, to viticulture and wine production creating sustainable products and year-round attractions. Holistically, increasing its quality and production along with local cuisine could be another approach to promote notable culinary brands. When managed effectively, agro and gastro-tourism value chains may support the livelihoods of families contributing poverty reduction in rural areas.

## Tourism Media Products

Guidebooks and brochures are usually developed and purchased in a tourists' country of origin. Nevertheless, host countries also play a role in accurately representing what the nation has to offer any prospective or current tourist. Visual media such as short films, more detailed booklets advertising local culture, specific experiences, and lesser known activities are essential to complement the broader scope of information offered by foreign-produced guidebooks. Such material can be strengthen, translated, and available more widely. The need for these materials is enhanced by the current pandemic, halting further development of the tourism sector. When tourism begins to recover, and safety measures are in place, there may be greater demand for technical means such as electronic and audio guides. Their development should be a priority to support the

<sup>11</sup> UNESCO World Heritage Sustainable Tourism Toolkit, Guide 7: Adding value through products, experiences, and services; <http://whc.unesco.org/sustainabletourismtoolkit/guides/guide-7-adding-value-through-products-experiences-and-services>

sector's recovery. Locally-produced material may correct cultural misperceptions, and strengthening understanding between cultures.

## Recommendations

As tourism in Uzbekistan recovers from the COV-19 pandemic, tourism-related sectors can actively encourage activities and products directly linked to culture so visitors travel and stay in places outside the main tourist routes. Uzbekistan can meet and exceed tourists' expectations for products and experiences associated with local culture.

The following section provides suggestion and direction to promote cultural tourism within the country.

## Governance

In a Post-COVID-19 environment, cultural tourism's relevance increases, so must the government's approach become more sophisticated to realize this subsectors potential. As regions and cities gain capacity and the private sector matures, the government can leverage the increasing resources for better socio-economic results. Multifaceted approaches can more effectively engage national institutions, international agencies, tourism operators, and NGOs. These institutions must act in concert to develop and adopt sustainable policies sensitive to the country's overall economic, social and environmental needs. The state's role is seminal to integrate each stakeholder, according to their capacity, in this difficulty 'project'. Tourism can better link with other sectors of the national economy. UNESCO recommends that in a interconnected industry, such as tourism, needs strict yet considerate regulatory and holistic action, driven by the right institutions. This is essential to effectively manage and preserve the complexities of cultural heritage that drive tourism in the first place<sup>12</sup>.

Public and state support needs to provide access to credit for start-ups, and improve education facilities while adopting environmentally sustainable solutions. Entrepreneurship and long-term investment should both be stimulated at different levels.

Sound management combining efforts of the private and public sectors is foundational to assure sustainable care for the environment throughout a renewed tourism promotion plan apt to face the challenges brought by the pandemics. The global drive for eco-tourism must relate to tourist concerns about safety, ecology, energy sustainability and environmental quality of the places they wish to visit.

Craftspeople associations can introduce guidelines and certification to preserve and enhance the authenticity of cultural products and locations. For handicrafts, design should care that products match to genuine and historically based cultural elements. Traditional skills and techniques for processing raw materials into salable products should be protected and sustainably developed to encourage that knowledge and skills be passed down across generations. Music and performance groups should be encouraged to promote genuine art to avoid the inadvertent generation of "plastic experiences" for tourists that do not reflect Uzbek tradition. The public sector should support an environment for positive effects across rural areas where most historical monuments are located integrating local culture to national, regional and international value chains. Through this, tourism becomes one way to address poverty and slow rural-urban migration by creating sustainable livelihoods beyond major cities. Strategies for managing these changes, including sustainable production, incentives, and investment are outlined below.

High demand pressures tourism infrastructure of cities and towns. Demand exceeds this infrastructure—in certain places, hastily built and unattractive hotels and restaurants diminish some beauty of the major sights. The post COVID-19 environment, requires both better planning and smarter investment to meet changing demands. Currently, some tourist sites have so much traffic from visitors, they are deteriorating. This is likely to change.

### ***Branding and Routes***

To unite foreign visitors' opinions of Uzbek's national heritage and be ready to attract visitors in the reduced global market, virtual tours and specific maps and itineraries of the spaces surrounding major destinations may inform visitors about many opportunities to explore the country's cultural riches. New more detailed documentaries and series can be developed in full partnership Uzbek experts. New "corridors" link different attractions to peoples and territories, enlarging number of places visited. These routes can be structured along the different features of national cultural heritage, art and gastronomy or historical periods are suitable themes, as they can stretch across the whole country. This systematic supply of information about lesser known, yet notable, locations associated with a particular food or product would strongly influence decision making about travel destinations

<sup>12</sup> Robinson M., Picard D. (2006), *Tourism, Culture and Sustainable Development*, Paris: UNESCO.

The design and support for virtual tours and tourist routes produces employment in itself and will be important to keep people in the sector during the crisis.<sup>13</sup> This effort should include the design of signposts, billboards, and fixed information points, besides producing and printing maps and leaflets. Local people and guides must know and understand the places or experiences promoted. This includes both the larger background and context and the nature of life during different times. Without these it is not possible to accurately present cultural highlights of a destination. Besides this knowledge, the changing preferences of tourists must be better understood. Local historians, ethnographers and other specialists should be involved in these designs.

For instance, routes fit well to promote *spiritual tourism* along different monuments and shrines associated with them. Beyond the faith dimensions of the pilgrimage, it becomes a way to study the history of religious beliefs in Central Asia. This routing mirrors European pilgrimage experiences, such as the Santiago de Compostela's 'Way of St. James', uniting these routes, could create a civilization route uniting East and West.<sup>14</sup> Tourist visits can be timed to coincide with social rituals, festivals and performances along these new routes. Such routes may also be timed to coincide with festivals, harvests, or ideal seasonal conditions for tourists.

Routing makes sense as part of a strategy to develop agriculture to increase the scenic appeal of rural Uzbekistan. Viticulture appeals to specific tourists who appreciate the scenic attraction of vineyards and sampling local products. Creating wine routes that mirror a European experience, as being pioneered in Georgia, may enhance the *character* landscapes and increase local appeal for tourists in the underdeveloped area of agro tourism.

### **Involvement of Local Communities and Capacity Building.**

Realizing the tourism potential of Uzbek heritage requires increased involvement and ownership of local host communities in its development. To enable this, more work must be done on raising the awareness of locals to motivate protection and promotion of their cultural and natural heritage. Residents should feel empowered to have a say in the design, operation and

interpretation of how tourism is managed in their areas<sup>15</sup>. Such an involvement helps assure tourism develops sustainably, considering first the welfare and livelihood of local hosts.

This requires proper training for urban and rural people, especially along proposed tourist routes. Developing a local understanding of sustainable tourism and the strategy for its development will ensure an increase in willingness to provide meaningful tourist experiences. Training and certifying guides selected from local populations to mitigate the flow of money from rural to urban areas. Local knowledge and identity is important; the more effectively a guide can help guests and locals shape intra-cultural dialogue, the more authentic and positive these experiences will be.

This, in turn, reinforces the need to develop the country's capacity for training, education and organization within the tourism and service provision industry. Regulation and certification around providing service to internationals to maintain safety, authenticity, and the sharing of economic and social benefits with local people.

### **Keeping a Regional Perspective.**

In a previous study,<sup>16</sup> I made the case for an integrated Central Asian approach to tourist affairs. The same is valid for tourism-related products, attractions, and services. Creating and extending food, art, and other specialized tourist routes in Uzbekistan can reach across Uzbekistan's borders<sup>17</sup> to intertwine with the culture and heritage from neighboring nations. Heritage products should celebrate the uniqueness, at both national and sub regional. Their promotion should be coordinated following similar and recognizable visuals and approaches contributing to the regional branding of Central Asia.

A regional approach, allows each National Tourist Organization/tourism ministry to develop a set of standards for marketing and communication of specific national heritage sites. While COV-19 will reduce the number of tourists to Central Asia in the short-term, it allows countries to market the appeal of their sights in a unified way. The proposed approach creates synergies in organizing and developing efforts across the region. The region becomes a *comprehensive*

<sup>13</sup> <https://uz.sputniknews.ru/tourism/20200412/13908196/V-Uzbekistane-planiruyut-razvivat-onlayn-turizm.html> 12.04.2020

<sup>14</sup> National tour operators are working in this direction. See S. Danilov, "Ot Shakhidindi do Sant'yago de Kompostela", 11 Nov. 2010; <https://mytashkent.uz/2010/11/11/ot-shahi-zindy-do-santyago-de-kompostela/>

<sup>15</sup> "Developing Multi-Destination Tourism Corridors In the Islamic Countries", Ankara: COMCEC Coordination Office, October 2019; <http://comcec.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/3-Nahla-MESBAH-2.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> Vielmini F. (2019), "Removing Tourism Barriers in Central Asia: A Strategy for Regional Coordination". CPRO Policy Brief, 2019-1; [http://cpro.wiut.uz/images/policies/Vielmini\\_Central\\_Asian\\_Tourism\\_Regional\\_Coordination\\_Final\\_December\\_2019.pdf](http://cpro.wiut.uz/images/policies/Vielmini_Central_Asian_Tourism_Regional_Coordination_Final_December_2019.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> Some tourism companies already offer simple itineraries that do this. But the full potential has not been developed.

destination Able to stand in a Post-COVID-19  
tourism market.

*-Fabrizio Vielmini,  
Karan Khurana*

---

## **Authors**

Fabrizio Vielmini is Senior Research Fellow at the Center for Policy Research & Outreach at Westminster International University in Tashkent, Uzbekistan.

Karan Khurana is Senior Lecturer at Westminster International University in Tashkent.

For further information about this brief, or to recommend a topic for a policy brief or collaborate with the Center for Policy Research and Outreach (CPRO) e-mail [cpro@wiut.uz](mailto:cpro@wiut.uz)