

THE POTENTIAL OF SURKHANDARYA REGION IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF ZIYARAH TOURISM IN UZBEKISTAN

Shakhriyrov Shokhrux

Doctoral student at Silk Road international university of tourism and cultural heritage

shohruxshaxriyrov@gmail.com

Abstract. The region possesses considerable scope for ziyarah tourism, but the volume of pilgrimage tourists and their economic significance cannot be derived from general tourist figures. This paper evaluates heritage documentation, tourism literature, statistical publications, and regional policy. It finds evidence of a rich Islamic heritage resource and evaluates the figures on the flow of visitors, hotel accommodation and development targets. There is evidence of growing tourism, but conflicting figures and inadequate definitions make it impossible to construct a consistent regional time series. A report of November 2023 suggests that around 85% of the reported number of foreign visitors come from two adjacent countries, Tajikistan and Afghanistan. This reveals market focus, but not the religious motivations. The findings point towards an integrated pilgrimage route, improved services to visitors and co-ordination of tourism with recreation infrastructure. They do not prove that the region is limited by visitor yield or that its long-term targets have been reached. The priorities are adequate statistics, direct study of travel motivations and expenditure, sensitive development of the route and evaluation of the economic benefits to the region.

Keywords: ziyarah tourism, pilgrimage tourism, Surkhandarya, Uzbekistan, cultural heritage, regional development

Ziyarah Tourism Potential in Surkhandarya

The heritage of Surkhandarya region provides an opportunity for developing pilgrimage travel and economic activities of locals without losing the religiosity of the sacred places. The present article focuses on the analysis of heritage assets, the actual performance in terms of tourism, and developmental priorities. The number of visitors as such is not sufficient for proving the existence of demand for pilgrimage tourism and its economic importance.

From the perspective of the country, the trend is connected with the increase in the number of tourists visiting Uzbekistan. According to preliminary figures of the official statistics, 11.7 million foreigners have visited Uzbekistan for tourism reasons in 2025,

46.8% more than in 2024 (National Statistics Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2026).

Conceptual and Research Context

Visitation is referred to the practice of visiting sacred and commemorative places related to Islam, which include shrines as well as tombs of scholars and religious leaders. The researches of Shakhriyorov on Samarkand and Bukhara relate this concept to cultural heritage and regional development (Shakhriyorov, 2023, 2025). It gives valuable destination perspectives; however, the findings obtained in those cities cannot be used in Surkhandarya without analyzing local demands, access, and facilities.

The historical researches are another point to be considered since they highlight that one should not regard pilgrimage as an innovative tourism product. The researchers Djuraeva et al. (2025) describe the evolution of this concept in the context of religious and political changes in southern Uzbekistan. It allows understanding the current state of affairs through a historical perspective and provides more comprehensive information about sacred places and communities. For measurement, pilgrimage should be identified through the purpose of travel. International recommendations distinguish overnight tourists from same-day visitors and recognise religion and pilgrimage as a trip-purpose category (United Nations, 2010). A shrine visit can form part of a journey with several motives. Neither foreign nationality nor residence in a Muslim-majority country establishes that pilgrimage was the principal reason for travel.⁴

Materials and Methods

A descriptive literature review based on the available evidence is adopted rather than a visitor survey or a causal study. The sources used include heritage documents, academic studies, government statistical records, the presidential decree, and reports regarding regional tourism indicators. Observations made concerning the region are considered as historical accounts. The policy pronouncements are kept distinct from achievements made, while estimates are not used to replace actual annual figures.

The arithmetic was verified against the tables and descriptions in the source material. Discrepant observations are kept distinct, while tourism figures are not reclassified as ziyarah statistics.

Results

Heritage Resources

The Ancient Termiz nomination to UNESCO's Tentative List includes a list of monuments within the site, which consists of al-Hakim at-Termizi, Sulton Saodat, Kokildor Khonaqo, Jarqo'rg'on minaret, and Oq Ostona Bobo. Al-Hakim at-Termizi is

⁴ United Nations (2010), paragraphs 2.9–2.13 and 3.17, provides the visitor categories and the religion/pilgrimage classification.

associated with an individual of Sufi origin living in the ninth century, while Sulton Saodat is described as a funerary complex of a family. Kokildor is dated back to the sixteenth century, and the minaret is dated to 110. These descriptions establish an important architectural and devotional foundation without treating every heritage monument as a pilgrimage site.⁵

Additionally, the resource base in this region consists of places related to Alauddin Attor, So'fi Olloyor, and Mavlonov Zohid (Mamatrayimov, 2023). The helpful division here can be drawn among places where people visit out of religious motivations, places which people mainly come to look at because of architecture, and finally supplementary places of culture and leisure.

Visitor Flows

Table 1 outlines the regional data that has been noted from published works. Abdullayev (2024) reflects growth for the period 2021 to 2022; however, the story behind the numbers shows something different for the year 2022. Islomov (2023) provides a further estimate. These discrepancies prevent precise growth comparisons across publications.⁶

Table 1. Reported Regional Visitor Flows

Period	Domestic	Foreign	Total	Source
2021	248,000	98,000	346,000	Abdullayev (2024)
2022	526,000	257,000	783,000	Abdullayev (2024)
2022 alternative	694,000	406,000	1,100,000	Islomov (2023)
2023 to report date	>1,120,000	≈600,000	≈1,720,000	Mamatrayimov (2023)

Note. Counts represent general tourism. The 2023 report was published on November 17 and describes the year to date, not the full January–November period. Its total is approximate. The two 2022 rows are alternative reports, not additive.

⁵ The Ancient Termiz record is a Tentative List submission, not evidence of World Heritage inscription. Its Kokildor description gives the sixteenth century; precise construction phases elsewhere should be checked against specialist conservation studies.

⁶ Abdullayev (2024, p. 193, Table 3) reports 783,000 visitors in 2022, while the paragraph below gives 994,400. Islomov (2023) reports 1.1 million. Their coverage cannot be reconciled from the published descriptions.

The numbers in the 2023 report show that 460,000 tourists came from Tajikistan 49,000 from Afghanistan and 84,000 from distant countries. When you add the two groups you get 509,000 tourists. This total makes up about 85% of the number of foreign visitors. It looks like there is an interest, from the neighboring countries.⁷

Services and Economic Evidence

Mamatrayimov (2023) says there are 197 places to stay: 51 hotels, 14 hostels and 132 guest houses. Guest houses made up 67% of the total places to stay.. It is not clear how many beds or overnight stays these guest houses have. The report also says that money from tourism services was than 16 million US dollars. It also predicts that by the end of the year the amount will be than 22 million US dollars. This prediction is not a confirmed number for the year.

Islomov (2023) says that the number of tourism places went up from 48 in 2017 to 116 in 2023. That is an increase of 141.7%. The final number is 241.7% of the number. The number of places and attractions shows how the supply changed.. It does not show the quality of services or how full the places are or the benefits from visiting the shrines.

Comparing economies needs work. Abdullayev (2024) says that tourism income was 310 billion so'm, for 2022. Islomov (2023) says that people who came to the country spent 12 million US dollars. Also it says that each visitor spent between 250 and 300 US dollars. These numbers cannot be used to measure how much money was made in a way unless the populations are the same and the definitions of spending match.⁸

Policy Framework

Presidential Resolution PQ-439 of December 16 2024 grants support to the Omonxona, Sangardak and Obihayot tourist centres. Presidential Resolution PQ-439 specifies infrastructure works for the years 2025 to 2026. Arrangements for private investment in accommodation and services for the years 2025, to 2027 as noted by the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan in 2024. These measures create an opportunity to coordinate recreation facilities with heritage routes. Presidential Resolution PQ-439 alone does not set a completion date or show economic impact.⁹

The 2030 objectives reported by Islomov (2023) say that 900,000 foreign visitors and 5 million domestic visitors are expected. The 2030 objectives say that US\$70 million in income from foreign visitors will be earned. The 2030 objectives say that the daily

⁷ The named groups sum to 593,000. Dividing 509,000 by the rounded total of 600,000 gives 84.8%; dividing by the named subtotal gives 85.8%. Neither calculation measures the proportion travelling for ziyarah.

⁸ Islomov's (2023) US\$12 million divided by the reported 1.1 million visitors is about US\$10.91 per visitor, not US\$250–300. The figures therefore cannot describe the same expenditure coverage and visitor population without further explanation.

⁹ See PQ-439, paragraphs 2, 6, and 9. The designated areas are 220.5 hectares at Omonxona, 615 at Sangardak, and 110 at Obihayot. These are planning areas, not completed resort capacity.

expenditure, from visitors will be US\$150. The 2030 objectives say that the average stay will be five days.

The 2030 objectives must be monitored with definitions.

A tourism export total cannot automatically be treated as equivalent to income from visitors.

Discussion

Evidence shows that there is a chance for development. It does not prove that the number of visitors is the main limit. Spending that is specific to shrines is still not measured. Policy must make visitor experience better. Bring more local benefits while testing which ideas actually work.

First set up a shared monitoring system. Main shrines should count visits in a way while short surveys for visitors should note where they live, their main and secondary reasons for travel how many nights they stay in the area their itinerary and how much they spend. The number of entries should stay separate from the number of people. Accommodation data and visitor surveys must use periods and definitions so that year-to-year comparisons make sense.

Second try out a pilgrimage route that connects the Termez complexes with chosen shrines. Arrange transport, explanations, meals and lodging while giving visitors time for prayer. Look at how nights people stay how happy they are and how much money they spend locally before making the program bigger.

Third try products that have proven markets. The number of visitors, from countries shows that we should study what travelers like how they book and whether they want to stay longer. Promotion must follow this evidence of guessing that nationality means a religious motive. Buddhist archaeology and other heritage sites can stay as attractions; the data do not say that one group should replace another.

Fourth mix development with conservation and local involvement. Teach guides and hosts to separate written history from tradition. Fun stops can go along with shrine visits. Claims that springs heal need separate medical proof. People who look after the sites and local residents must decide how visitors are arranged what business is. What maintenance is needed. Success must be measured by how visitors feel, how the heritage stays in shape and how much money stays in the local area together with the number of arrivals.

Conclusion

The heritage and tourism services in Surkhandarya offer a base for ziyarah development. Conflicting numbers and unmeasured pilgrimage demand make it hard to say much about the economy. Tested itineraries, data, direct research with visitors conservation efforts and involvement of local people would help future studies look at the impact on stays and, on the lives of people.

References

Abdullayev, B. O. (2024). Surxondaryo viloyatida turizmni rivojlanish samaradorligini ekonometrik modellashtirishda iqtisodiy-statistik tahlili [Economic-statistical analysis in econometric modelling of tourism development efficiency in Surkhandarya region]. *AgroInnovasiya*, 2(2), 187–198. <https://agroinnovatsiya.uz/index.php/ag/article/download/97/178/180>

Djuraeva, S., Alimova, M., & Murtazaeva, G. (2025). Stages of the historical development of pilgrimage tourism in the south of Uzbekistan. *East European Historical Bulletin*, (36), 203–219. <https://doi.org/10.24919/2519-058X.36.339333>

Islomov, F. (2023, November 17). *Surxon vohasining turizm salohiyatiga bir nazar* [A review of the tourism potential of the Surkhan oasis]. Review.uz. <https://review.uz/uz/post/surxon-vohasining-turizm-salohiyatiga-bir-nazar>

Mamatrayimov, X. (2023, November 17). *Surxondaryo turizm makoniga aylanmoqda* [Surkhandarya is becoming a tourism destination]. Uzbekistan National News Agency. https://uza.uz/oz/posts/surxondaryo-turizm-makoniga-aylanmoqda_539520

National Commission of the Republic of Uzbekistan for UNESCO. (2008, January 18). *Ancient Termiz* [Tentative List submission]. UNESCO World Heritage Centre. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/5298/>

National Statistics Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan. (2026, January 16). *2025-yilda O'zbekistonga 11,7 million nafar turist kelgan* [11.7 million tourists visited Uzbekistan in 2025]. <https://stat.uz/uz/matbuot-markazi/qo-mita-yangiliklar/66309-2025-jilda-zbekistonga-11-7-million-nafar-turist-kelgan-2>

President of the Republic of Uzbekistan. (2024, December 16). *Surxondaryo viloyatining tog'li-rekreatsion hududlarida turizm infratuzilmasini yaxshilash hamda zamonaviy xizmat ko'rsatish va turizm obyektlarini barpo etish chora-tadbirlari to'g'risida* [Measures to improve tourism infrastructure and establish modern service and tourism facilities in the mountain-recreational areas of Surkhandarya region] (Resolution No. PQ-439). LexUZ. <https://lex.uz/uz/docs/-7263277>

Shakhriyrov, S. (2023). Exploring the potential of ziyorah tourism in Uzbekistan: A comprehensive study of Samarkand. *Journal of Fundamental Studies*, 1(8), 73–81. <https://imfaktor.com/index.php/jofs/article/view/621>

Shakhriyrov, S. (2025). Exploring the sacred economy: Ziyorah tourism in Bukhara, Uzbekistan. *Science and Innovation*, 4(4), 55–64. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15269324>

United Nations. (2010). *International recommendations for tourism statistics 2008* (Studies in Methods, Series M No. 83/Rev. 1). https://unstats.un.org/unsd/publication/Seriesm/SeriesM_83rev1e.pdf

