

A tourism research agenda for Uzbekistan

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Uzbekistan is an emerging tourism destination that has experienced a strong increase in tourist numbers since 2017. However, as little research on tourism development in Uzbekistan exists to date, this study analyzes possible research topics and proposes a tourism research agenda for the country. A mix of methods was used, consisting of participant observation, semi-structured qualitative expert interviews and qualitative content analysis. The results revealed a range of research gaps in different areas which could be synthesized into a total of ten fields, clustered into three overarching areas – namely market research, management, and culture and the environment. The subordinate research fields identified are demand, statistics, potential, governance, products, infrastructure and development, marketing, heritage and nation-building, sustainability, and peace and conflict prevention. A strategic research plan based on this tourism research agenda could help foster a purposeful scientific debate. Tourism research in these fields has the potential both to investigate and compare theoretical issues in a unique context and to produce applicable results that can make a relevant contribution to tourism development in Uzbekistan.

Keywords: *tourism, Uzbekistan, destination, tourism development, emerging markets*

1 INTRODUCTION

Uzbekistan is a landlocked country in Central Asia, founded in 1924 as the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic and independent since 1991. It is located in a territory that was an essential transfer point for cultures, languages, religions and goods between Asia and Europe during the development of the ancient Silk Road, leaving behind a diverse cultural heritage. It is from the legacy of the Timurid period, an age of exchange and architectural flourishing, that Uzbekistan draws much of its current cultural tourism potential. Over 7000 historical monuments are located in the cities of Samarkand, Bukhara, Khiva and Shahrīsabz, and the country boasts five UNESCO World Heritage Sites (Saidmamatov et al. 2020: 5). While Uzbekistan was largely isolated, and therefore limited in tourism activities until 2016, it achieved strong growth with political change, tripling the number of incoming tourists from 2 million in 2016 to over 6.7 million in 2019 (World Bank 2022). This makes international and individual tourism an important economic source for the country, the development of which has been declared a national task.

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Current tourism development in Uzbekistan is an important topic for tourism research for various reasons. Uzbekistan, as a post-Soviet state that has been gradually opening up internationally since 2016, is facing the promise of international tourism, and thus entering a new era of change. This offers the opportunity not only to study and compare tourism phenomena in a completely unique context, but also to provide valuable applicable perspectives for the future development of Uzbekistan's tourism sector. It is even more regrettable that to date there is very little research on tourism in Uzbekistan, and thus no assistance for decision-makers. This paper aims to create a starting point for tourism research on Uzbekistan by identifying relevant topics for study based on empirical data and synthesizing them into a research agenda. The topics identified and questions raised here are intended to provide a directive and stimulus for future research.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on tourism in Uzbekistan to date is rudimentary and limited to general observations or specific individual topics. Before presenting the current state of research, this article will first outline the dynamics of tourism development after the break-up of the Soviet Union.

2.1 Tourism in post-Soviet Uzbekistan

As part of the Soviet Union Uzbekistan played a key role as it was seen as the center of Soviet Central Asia and presented by Moscow as the Soviet version of a modern Muslim society. Accordingly, Uzbekistan regularly received the most foreign tourists in Central Asia (Kassymbekova 2014: 75). Despite increases in tourism activities in the Soviet Uzbek Republic, few reliable statistics exist on incoming tourists from the past century. Airey and Shackley (1997: 203) assume that, apart from business travelers, just over 45,000 cultural tourists visited the country in 1990. In the years thereafter, tourist numbers are assumed to have declined, due to the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the disappearance of existing tourism infrastructures. Before the country's independence, all Uzbek tourism was handled through Moscow, and contact with the global tourism market was through Russian organizations such as Intourist.

Transit was also usually via Moscow with Russian Aeroflot flights. With the end of the Soviet Union, the Uzbek tourism market was therefore disrupted. Uzbekistan first had to develop its own transport connections, contacts and markets as well as build the necessary skills for this purpose (Airey/Shackley 1997: 205). How this was achieved was investigated by Airey and Shackley and presented in the first independent study of tourism development in post-Soviet Uzbekistan.

In addition to the impact of the collapse of the Soviet Union on the tourism sector, the authors emphasized the great importance of the establishment of *Uzbektourism*. This organization was formed as a conglomerate of the previous Soviet tourism authorities and functions as a national destination marketing organization (DMO) under the state tourism department. It eventually ensured the commercialization and privatization of the tourism sector, promoted the country in the global tourism market and controlled the quality of tourism products (Airey/Shackley 1997: 205). With the establishment of Uzbekistan Airways in 1991, the country also offered its own domestic as well as international air connections early on. A presidential decree

Table 1 Number of non-resident visitors at Uzbekistan's national borders (000s)

2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
1069	1215	975	1393	1895	1969	1862	1918	2027	2690	5346	6749

Source: World Bank (2022).

was also issued in 1995 with various tourism-promoting measures (Airey/Shackley 1997: Figure 2). Airey and Shackley (1997: 208) concluded: 'The Uzbekistan Government has begun to create an economic and regulatory environment within which market-orientated tourism can be developed.' As a result of these positive developments, Uzbekistan was finally able to record annual increases in incoming tourists, with exceptions in 2010 and 2014 (Table 1).

Nevertheless, the growth until 2017 was only moderate. Horák (2014) identified the strict visa regulations, according to which an invitation from a local tour operator was required, as a major obstacle to tourism development, as this made individual tourism possible only under restrictions. Shortcomings were also revealed by Baum and Thompson (2007), who investigated the labor market of the Uzbek tourism industry and concluded that workforces in different sectors at all levels had very limited training and education for their jobs. Language skills (especially English), information and communications technology (ICT) skills and organizational/business capabilities were identified as key deficiencies. The authors therefore saw an urgent need for investment in human resource (HR) development as a key priority for tourism in Uzbekistan.

These and similar problems were not really addressed until 2016, when, following the death of the state's founder and long-time president, Islom Karimov, the then prime minister, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, succeeded him and ushered in a phase of political opening. Between 2016 and 2019 the new government implemented several far-reaching reforms to promote tourism and made it one of the priority sectors for the development of the national economy. According to presidential decree No. UP-4947 of 7 February 2017, the objectives of the reforms were: 'Accelerated development of the tourism industry, increasing its role and contribution to the economy, diversification and improvement of the quality of tourist services, expansion of tourist infrastructure' (quoted from Sobirov/Alimova 2019: 134). These included the introduction of visa-free entry for 64 countries, with a possible stay of 30 days, and the launch of a new e-visa system for 126 countries (Sobirov/Alimova 2019: 135). In addition, various measures have been taken to strengthen local tourism businesses and make investment in the tourism sector attractive. These include, for example, the establishment of so-called free tourist zones. This refers to free economic zones where special tax benefits apply to businesses that meet certain criteria. Such zones have already been established in Tashkent, Samarkand and Bukhara (Sobirov 2018). A simplified procedure for the approval and financing of family guesthouses has also been established, and various nature reserves have been opened for tourists. In 2018 an International Investment Forum for Tourism was also organized in Tashkent, hosting participants from 36 countries. Overall, this boosted the number of foreign tourists substantially (see Table 1), and the number of tour operators and hotels also more than doubled until the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic (Sobirov/Alimova 2019: 136–138).

The government's strategic goal for the future is to attract more than 9 million tourists annually by 2025 and to raise the tourism industry's share of gross domestic product (GDP) to 5 percent, from 2.8 percent in 2019 (Sobirov/Alimova 2019; World Bank 2022).

2.2 Topics in recent tourism research

Tourism research on Central Asia in general and Uzbekistan in particular is mainly problem-driven: it tries to identify obstacles hindering tourism development and find ways to increase tourism activities and seize unused potential. Kantarci, for example, examined Turkish tour operators' perceptions of travel conditions in Central Asian countries. In general, his results indicate that the main barrier for Turkish tour operators regarding Central Asia is lack of enough demand, followed by lack of effective marketing. He suggests that there is a need to develop strategic initiatives to be more effective in promotion and marketing in the world travel market as they 'suffer from "poor image" or "no image" [and] also require further research in areas of product development, specific market assessment, pricing, and safety issues' (Kantarci 2007b: 67). In this regard, Kantarci (2007a) examined the destination image of Central Asia in the Turkish market. The author found that perceptions of safety and security conditions especially had a relatively low mean score, which may deter tourists from choosing Central Asia as a travel destination. In a similar study Lee et al. (2012) compared pre-travel and post-travel images of Korean tourists who visited Central Asia. These authors found discrepancies in infrastructure and amenities, such as travel information and information about tourist sites, cleanliness and sanitation (including safety of drinking water), and the availability of arts and crafts shops. They concluded that tourism promoters should improve travelers' experiences in these areas to avoid negative post-travel images.

A recent study also analyzed the destination image of Uzbekistan presented by the DMO and user-generated social media images. The authors emphasize the opportunities and challenges of social media for shaping a destination's image, and conclude that 'Uzbektourism is concentrating ... on heritage tourism development and promotion of culture and traditions ... Images of nature and ... nature experiences are almost totally lacking in the website material' (Fayzullaev et al. 2021: 455). In contrast, the image represented by user-generated content is more diverse and depicts natural heritage and landscapes. These findings suggest that Uzbek tourism marketing could diversify the country's destination image by extending the focus to natural tourist sites. The period of Soviet hegemony is missing completely although city infrastructure is heavily influenced by Soviet heritage. The post-Soviet image of Uzbekistan is thus being created solely through its pre-Soviet history and heritage (Fayzullaev et al. 2021: 458). However, in a study on destination attractiveness, Raimkulov et al. prove that cultural attractiveness and local hospitality are the main drivers for overall satisfaction among US tourists visiting Uzbekistan. Furthermore, they showed that natural beauty, good infrastructure and attractive prices had no significant influence on satisfaction. This means that destination attractiveness components may not perform beyond tourist expectations, and just meet tourists' needs. Thus, the authors conclude that price policies should be monitored and natural sites and infrastructure enhanced (Raimkulov et al. 2021: 12). This suggests a diversification of Uzbekistan's tourism product. In this direction several publications have argued for an expansion of the tourism opportunities on offer and analysis of the possibilities for niche markets. Accordingly, future tourism markets that are especially promising include religious tourism (Navruz-Zoda/Navruz-Zoda 2016), agri- and ecotourism (Elbek et al. 2016; Saidmamatov et al. 2020), handicraft and material culture (Shamukhitdinova 2017), gastronomy (Patterson/Turaev 2020) and medical tourism (Choi et al. 2021).

Generally speaking, tourism in Uzbekistan is an under-researched field, and only very little tourism research has been conducted that solely focuses on Uzbekistan as

opposed to Central Asia as a region. A major reason why few authors have focused exclusively on Uzbekistan presumably may also be difficulties faced in the past by foreigners conducting research in the country due to its international isolation until 2016 and strict visa policy. Another reason for so little research activity may be a lack of reliable data on basic tourism numbers from sources such as the state or tourism organizations. A quantitative content analysis that exemplarily analyzed the publications in the Central Asian Survey for the period 1982–2020 revealed that only 8 percent of the publications addressed Uzbekistan alone, and another 7.3 percent involved Uzbekistan together with other Central Asian countries.¹ Among these publications, only one article from 1984 focused on tourism (0.6 percent of publications on Uzbekistan). In only nine other articles does tourism appear as a secondary topic (5.5 percent of the publications on Uzbekistan). The Central Asian Survey is thus symptomatic of the state of research on tourism in Uzbekistan, which is limited to a huge extent on overarching studies on tourism in Central Asian countries in general and to basic exploratory research on future tourism potential.

In view of this rudimentary state of research and the new political developments since 2016, it therefore seems reasonable to identify and evaluate possible research topics in a first step. Subsequently, a research agenda can be developed that can serve as both a stimulus and a directive for future tourism research on Uzbekistan. To achieve this goal, the following research questions were addressed:

Q1: What are relevant topics for research on tourism in Uzbekistan?

Q2: How can these topics be evaluated?

3 METHODOLOGY

To investigate these research questions, the authors decided to assume the role of tourists themselves in order to conduct an exploratory study of the local tourism infrastructure. Therefore, they collected primary research data during a one-month field visit to Uzbekistan from mid-October to mid-November 2020. They followed an ethnographic approach and applied different research methods. The tourist offers were investigated by means of participant observation. In addition, the authors conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with experts from Germany and Uzbekistan before, during and after their stay in order to uncover research possibilities and challenges to tourism development in Uzbekistan. The interviews were then analyzed using qualitative content analysis according to inductively formed categories and examined for commonalities.

3.1 Participant observation

The authors traveled to the cities of Tashkent, Samarkand, Bukhara, Shahrisabz, Khiva, Urgench and Nukus, as well as the Kyzylkum Desert, and visited, observed and evaluated a total of 38 tourist sites. The cities visited are, along with Kokand in the Fergana Valley, the main points of attraction for tourists in Uzbekistan.

1. The Central Asian Survey claims to be ‘the only established peer reviewed, multi-disciplinary journal in the world concerned with the history, politics, cultures, religions, and economies of the Central Asian and Caucasian regions’ (Central Eurasian Studies Society 2022).

Through participant observation, the authors were able to travel through the country as tourists and have informal conversations with local service providers about the challenges of tourism for them and their country. Participant observation enabled the authors to obtain insider information and to travel independently through the country. The sites visited were additionally assessed in a structured way using an observation grid. The authors used an observation questionnaire created with Google Forms, which could be filled out on-site with a smartphone. With the help of the observation grid, the authors evaluated the accessibility, attractiveness, availability, affordability and repeatability of the sites using a four-point scale. In addition, the sites were classified into the categories of nature, leisure/recreation, culture, entertainment and event/festivity, whereby multiple entries were possible. An additional comments field allowed for notes on the visitor experience.

3.2 Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted jointly by both authors. They lasted between 40 and 110 minutes and were conducted and recorded via online meetings. A total of 19 interviews were conducted with experts from the fields of state organization (2), development aid (5), culture and tourism (6) and science (6) until data saturation was reached, which was determined by when little or no new information was gained with regard to the research questions. The participants were recruited using snowball sampling.

The questionnaire included 11 questions (Table 2), framed rather broadly in regard to the exploratory research design and to minimize possible interview bias through the questions. The interviewees were provided with the questionnaire in advance. Because only tourism-related experts were interviewed, the questions were specifically aimed at identifying possible research topics for tourism. The semi-structured approach made it possible to include additional questions in individual cases or to skip questions that had become superfluous. In particular, questions 1–4 were exploratory in nature; questions 5–7 aimed to address additional topics that were identified as relevant in the literature review; and questions 8–11 aimed to trigger additional thoughts and get as much information about current conflicts caused by tourism as possible. The interviews were conducted in English, German or Russian (the latter through a translator). All interviews were then transcribed with the help of student assistants.

3.3 Qualitative content analysis

The qualitative content analysis was based on the transcribed audio recordings of the interviews. The transcripts were comprehensively coded using the qualitative data analysis software ATLAS.ti (Version 9.1.5.0).² Instead of using a deductive approach and forming categories for coding beforehand, an inductive category formation based on Mayring (2014) was applied whereby categories are formed inductively directly from the material in a generalization process. According to Mayring, this is very fruitful compared to deductive coding within qualitative research because it ‘aims at a true description without bias owing to the preconceptions of the researcher, an

2. ATLAS.ti (<https://atlasti.com>) is a computer program for qualitative data analysis that can systematically analyze unstructured data, and by different means visualize hidden structures and relations.

Table 2 Questionnaire for expert interviews

1	Where do you see Uzbekistan's greatest potential for tourism?
2	What are the most important topics for tourism research in Uzbekistan?
3	How would you prioritize these topics?
4	Which of these topics exist in this form only in Uzbekistan?
5	What subtopics can you name for 'tourism and the environment'?
6	What subtopics can you name for 'tourism and culture'?
7	What subtopics can you name for 'tourism and peace'?
8	Which tourism issues do you think are relevant for younger people?
9	What problems/challenges do you think the Uzbek tourism industry faces?
10	Do you see any negative developments in Uzbekistan caused by tourism?
11	Tourism in Uzbekistan 2040 – what will it be like?

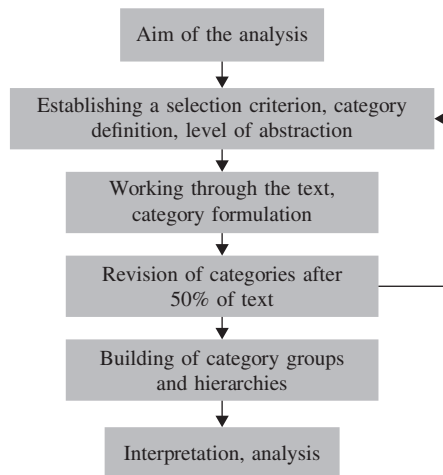


Figure 1 Inductive coding process

understanding of the material in terms of the material'; and, in contrast to 'open coding', inductive coding follows a systematic encoding process (Mayring 2014: 79, 80). Based on this, the data was analyzed and coded by the first author according to the steps shown in Figure 1.

An additional advantage of inductive coding is that the resulting category system can itself be interpreted and analyzed at the end in terms of the research question. The formed categories, their quantitative accumulation and their interrelationships were thus analyzed, and networks of quotations were formed from which the possible research topics could be derived. Central to the analysis was the code Research, which was given whenever issues for research on tourism were addressed in the interviews. This makes up a total of 64 quotations. With ATLAS.ti these quotations could be visualized in a network and linked with additional cross-codes regarding the topic they addressed. Thereby, the code Research is linked to a total of 30 cross-codes whose relationships vary in quantity. The most frequent joint codings with Research were Problems, Image, Tourism Management, Target Groups, Cultural Heritage,

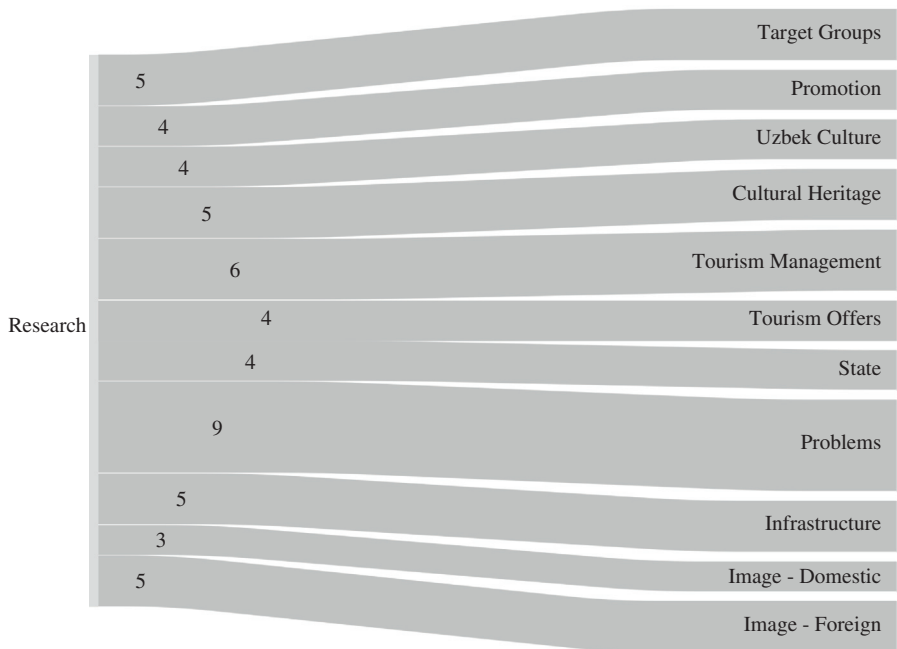


Figure 2 Sankey diagram cross-codes of code Research (plotted with ATLAS.ti 9.1.5.0)

Infrastructure, Promotion, Uzbek Culture, Tourism Offers and State. The frequencies can be seen in Figure 2.

4 RESULTS

From the empirical data, three overarching areas could be derived – namely, market research, management, and culture and the environment. These, in turn, comprise relevant research topics for tourism in Uzbekistan, as outlined below.

4.1 Market research

A lack of basic data and surveys in market research was identified – especially regarding demand, statistics and potential.

4.1.1 Demand

One deficiency is the lack of data on the demand side of Uzbek tourism. This makes it unclear which target groups could and should be won over by marketing measures. Uzbekistan undoubtedly has potential for various forms of tourism, and could therefore develop and promote different branches. However, it is unclear which target groups should be addressed, in which way and to what extent. In particular, the expectations that younger generations have of a tourist stay in Uzbekistan are not known (interviews

5, 14, 17). This also concerns domestic tourism, which has been neglected in previous research (interview 13). The travel motives and needs of both foreign and domestic tourists could serve as a basis for marketing and destination management, and for the design of guided tours by travel companies. This also applies to religious tourism, which currently mainly involves Muslim travelers. For instance, an examination could be conducted as to what extent religious sites in southern Uzbekistan might also be of interest to Buddhist travelers, and how such tours could be designed (interview 19).

4.1.2 Statistics

There is currently an absence of basic reliable statistical data on Uzbekistan's tourism market. This is due to the lack of an objective institute or organization in the country responsible for collecting and providing unfiltered data on a comprehensive platform. Statistics are mostly incomplete, and secondary data is not reliable because its origin is often unclear. This makes data-based research difficult, and is also a disadvantage for attracting investors (interviews 5, 18).

4.1.3 Potential

Although it is undisputed that Uzbekistan has tourism potential, it is unclear in which areas, other than cultural and religious tourism, and how these can be developed. Agritourism, community-based tourism, nature tourism, active tourism, gastro-tourism and medical tourism are buzzwords that come up again and again. However there are no studies on how useful such forms of tourism really are in Uzbekistan and how they could be realized. This makes it difficult to develop successful tourism products and tap into unused opportunities (interviews 11, 13).

4.2 Management

The field of tourism management is also an under-researched area in Uzbekistan. There is high demand for applied research, especially in the areas of product development, infrastructure/urban development and marketing; and tourism governance is another promising research area.

4.2.1 Products

Research on product development is needed, in particular regarding tourism offers to fit respective target groups (interviews 10, 17). In this context, it would also be of interest to explore how a diverse offer could be created to encourage tourists to prolong their stay, or even to build a regular client base (interview 16). The repetition potential of the cultural tourism offer is rather low, which is why research into diversification possibilities is necessary. It would be interesting to see which product lines could be developed (interview 8). Regions such as Karakalpakstan, as well as various mountain and desert areas, offer opportunities for adventure tourism, but it is unclear how these can be used in a tourism offer. It should also be explored which offers could address a younger target group (interview 6). A sub-issue to be explored here is the digitization of tourism offers and services and their influence on the tourism experience (interview 8).

4.2.2 *Marketing*

Research gaps are also revealed in marketing. The question of Uzbekistan's unique selling point alone is not easy to answer as there are no studies on tourists' motives for traveling there (interview 5). This leads to questions about Uzbekistan's positioning in the world market, the country's image abroad and the possibilities for increasing competition (interview 17). Here the current marketing channels, in which foreign PR agencies are often not involved at all, could be examined. Studies on the country's image abroad could also provide information on necessary marketing measures. Open questions in this context could be:

- What image do foreign tourists have of Uzbekistan before and after their trip?
- How does Uzbekistan present itself as a destination, and how can a favorable image be created? (interview 14)

It would also be conceivable to develop brands and offers for certain regions to guarantee quality (interview 10).

4.2.3 *Governance*

Tourism development in Uzbekistan is essentially a politically motivated endeavor. However, the political leadership provides only limited insight into future tourism planning, and it is unclear to what extent decisions are made based on scientific research. The question of how far a largely internationally isolated country can transform into a nation with economically significant international tourism remains unanswered (interview 2). A comparison with other countries is also not possible due to Uzbekistan's unique history. The strong growth in tourist numbers in recent years raises several questions for tourism governance, such as:

- How must the country, cities and inhabitants be prepared for tourism?
- To what extent do tourist flows need to be managed?
- How can relevant stakeholders and regions within Uzbekistan be involved?
- How can the balancing act between modernization and authenticity as well as regulation and liberalization be achieved?
- How can negative impacts of tourism on culture and nature be minimized? (interviews 2, 6, 17)

The national tourism committee cannot be clearly separated from the local DMOs here (if any exist) as competencies are not clearly specified. Therefore, it should be examined how a framework can be created in which self-initiative is strengthened and entrepreneurial involvement takes place. For this purpose, it would be necessary to explore the tourism destination level and ways to increase the professionalization of its stakeholders (interview 9).

4.2.4 *Infrastructure and development*

Further research into tourism infrastructure is needed. Through various projects the infrastructure in the country is being massively expanded specifically for tourism. This raises questions not only about the necessity and wisdom of such construction projects, but also about their impact on the population and the environment. There is a lack of long-term research on the quality of infrastructure projects and their

impacts (interview 2). For this reason, it is unclear which logistical and infrastructural measures are needed to make Uzbekistan more attractive for individual travelers (interview 10). In general, Uzbekistan is a blank slate for research in the field of urban development for tourism (interview 3).

4.3 Culture and the environment

Cultural tourism is the cornerstone of Uzbekistan's tourism sector. The use of the country's cultural heritage for tourism raises various issues, ranging from the proper restoration of historical sites to dealing with the Soviet past in the context of nation-building. In addition, research could support the promotion of sustainable tourism and the avoidance of negative environmental impacts. Finally, tourism and peace emerged as an important field of research in light of the recurring conflicts in the region.

4.3.1 *Heritage and nation-building*

The country's rich cultural heritage is subject to various influences due to it being used for tourism. The rehabilitation and renovation of World Heritage Sites in recent years has shown that there can often be a fine line between preserving cultural assets and destroying them. Possible research topics include what influence tourism has on the use of cultural heritage in Uzbekistan; and how negative impacts – such as the demolition of historic old towns, or large-scale renovations of historic buildings (as opposed to restorations) – can be minimized. This also encompasses questions about the proper development of previously unused cultural assets, the inclusion of everyday modern Uzbek culture in tourism offers and archaeological investigations at historical sites – especially Karakalpakstan (interviews 2, 6, 19). However, it is not only pre-Soviet cultural heritage that offers research opportunities, but also the way the Soviet past has been dealt with. Therefore, the formation of an independent Uzbek nation after 1991 could be studied through tourism.

4.3.2 *Sustainability*

Sustainability is a hot topic in Uzbekistan, first and foremost due to the country's responsibility for one of the largest man-made environmental disasters in history: the drying up of the Aral Sea – formerly the fourth largest inland lake in the world. Air and water pollution can be exacerbated by increasing tourism, and so a functioning waste-management system for tourist sites is essential. Protection of the environment is fundamental, particularly if natural areas, which are now increasingly being opened for construction activities, are to be developed for tourism in the future. In this context, it is debatable which understanding of sustainability will prevail in Uzbekistan at all (interview 19). Questions such as what sustainable tourism means for the actors, how it can be implemented and to what extent ecotourism or community-based tourism can contribute to the protection of nature and culture should therefore be examined through research (interview 6).

4.3.3 *Peace and conflict prevention*

Geopolitically, Uzbekistan lies in an unstable region and shares borders with Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan. Zig-zag borders in the Fergana Valley and

water disputes with Turkmenistan and Tajikistan have repeatedly led to conflicts in the past. Religious extremism from the south is also a constant threat. As a former Soviet state, Uzbekistan lies within Russia's sphere of influence and is shielded from Russian hegemonic aspirations only by Kazakhstan – which, for its part however, cooperates closely with Russia. Similarly, China and Turkey are increasingly active in the region, creating dependencies through large-scale infrastructure projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative. Religious extremism, water shortages, border disputes in the Fergana Valley, and future Russian and Chinese aspirations are therefore potential areas of conflict that should be dealt with preventively. The extent to which tourism can support this is another under-researched field (interviews 3, 15, 18).

5 DISCUSSION

The results of this study show that fundamental work is needed to kick-start tourism research in Uzbekistan. The identified topics are so basic that any research to be done will have to start nearly from scratch. At the same time, these topics offer unique research opportunities as they depict phenomena specifically related to Uzbekistan's unique cultural attractions and historical and geographical evolution. Sporadic research initiatives within Uzbekistan are too fragmented, so a strategic research plan based on this proposed tourism research agenda could help foster a purposeful scientific debate. This may be especially important as the value of scientific research for the practical development of tourism in Uzbekistan can be considered particularly high. Future research could focus on the comparison of tourism topics in Central Asia to meet different countries' perspectives.

To facilitate cross-border tourism, the joint marketing of Central Asia with one visa (for example the 'Silk Road Visa') could be a practical implication (see World Tourism Forum Institute 2022). These issues are also becoming more topical against the backdrop of the current conflicts in some post-Soviet states (especially Ukraine, but also Georgia and Moldova). The question of how tourism can or cannot contribute to peace and stability in post-Soviet countries is highly relevant. Moreover, Muslim pilgrimage tourism is a topic that deserves more scientific attention in the future as there is an opportunity for Uzbekistan to position itself as a lower-cost 'second-tier' Muslim pilgrimage destination, in contrast to the main destination – Saudi Arabia. This study of course has its limitations, since some regions – such as the south (Termez, the Fergana Valley, and so on) – were not included in the participant observations. As tourism research in Uzbekistan is at its very beginning, no results could be generated on questions of digitalization in tourism, which is one of the main topics in international tourism research besides sustainability. The topic of LGBT tourism was also not researchable, as homosexuality is punishable in Uzbekistan.

6 CONCLUSION

The present study examined tourism development in Uzbekistan with regard to relevant topics for future research. It was shown that, although tourism activities have a long tradition in the territory of present-day Uzbekistan, research in this field is still in its infancy. The research results revealed a variety of gaps in different areas, which could be synthesized into a total of ten research fields clustered into three overarching areas. Consequently, there is a need for research in the areas of market

research, management, and culture and the environment. The subordinate research fields identified are demand, statistics, potential, governance, products, infrastructure and development, marketing, heritage and nation-building, sustainability, and peace and conflict prevention. Tourism research in these fields has the potential to both investigate and compare theoretical issues in a unique heritage context and to produce applied research results that can make a relevant contribution to tourism development in Uzbekistan. In addition, the fields lend themselves to interdisciplinary research projects. The research agenda developed is intended to be both a directive and an incentive to form a starting point for future research on tourism in Uzbekistan.

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List of interviews

All the following are personal communications.

1. 20 October 2020
2. 21 October 2020
3. 22 October 2020
4. 23 October 2020
5. 24 October 2020
6. 26 October 2020
7. 26 October 2020
8. 27 October 2020
9. 27 October 2020
10. 29 October 2020
11. 3 November 2020
12. 3 November 2020
13. 5 November 2020
14. 5 November 2020
15. 5 November 2020
16. 20 November 2020
17. 25 November 2020
18. 2 December 2020
19. 16 December 2020