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HISTORY OF PILGRIMAGE TOURISM AND ITS ROLE AND IMPORTANCE IN THE TOURISM SECTOR

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Abstract

Pilgrimage tourism includes travel by representatives of various religions to sacred places. This article analyzes the history of pilgrimage tourism, its role in the tourism sector, and its economic and cultural significance. It also emphasizes the importance of developing pilgrimage tourism in Uzbekistan, improving infrastructure, creating favorable conditions for foreign and domestic tourists, and introducing digital technologies. The development of pilgrimage tourism not only brings economic benefits but also serves to strengthen cultural exchange and national identity.

Keywords

pilgrimage tourism, religious travel, sacred places, historical shrines, infrastructure, economic development, cultural heritage, international cooperation, digital technologies, tourism industry.

Pilgrimage tourism is one of the most widespread and historically ancient forms of tourism worldwide. Representatives of various religions have traveled for centuries to sacred places to achieve spiritual purification, gain moral nourishment, and experience religious enlightenment. This type of tourism is based not only on personal faith and religious experience but has also become an important branch of the tourism industry. In Uzbekistan, pilgrimage tourism also holds an important place. Shrines of great figures such as Imam al-Bukhari, Bahauddin Naqshband, Gijduvani, Shohi-Zinda, and Termizi located in the country attract not only local but also international tourists. During the years of independence, a number of measures have been implemented to improve these pilgrimage sites, develop infrastructure, and create favorable conditions for foreign visitors. This article examines the history of pilgrimage tourism, its role in the tourism sector, and its economic and cultural importance. It also discusses the directions for developing pilgrimage tourism in Uzbekistan, existing problems, and possible solutions.

Pilgrimage tourism refers to travel undertaken by representatives of various religions for the purpose of pilgrimage. Traditionally, it relates to religiously motivated travel, but it can also include secular journeys of special significance for pilgrims. For many people, pilgrimage provides spiritual support during difficult times. People travel to certain destinations to experience religious enlightenment. Often, long and sometimes challenging journeys provide opportunities for reflection. As a form of travel, pilgrimage enables people to visit sacred places. A religious tourist is defined as a person who travels outside their country of permanent residence for a period not exceeding six months in order to visit sacred places and religious centers. Religious tourism refers to activities related to providing services and meeting the needs of travelers who visit sacred places and religious centers outside their usual environment.

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Almost all regions of Uzbekistan have pilgrimage tourism destinations, and the number of tourists visiting specifically for pilgrimage purposes is significant.

Pilgrimage movements became particularly active in the 15th–16th centuries. Many pilgrims masked their goals and interests with religious motives. Pilgrimages usually involve visits to shrines of prominent religious figures. Since the destinations are considered sacred, many believe that prayers performed there are more likely to be answered. Some pilgrimage sites rely entirely on tourism for their income, which in turn impacts surrounding areas as tourists use hotels and restaurants. According to the scholar Vukonic, the economic aspects of religious travel remain one of the least studied topics within the religion–tourism framework, often focusing only on individual sacred sites. Religious pilgrimage has long served as an economic generator in visited regions, as services are developed to meet pilgrims' needs, a situation that continues today. Central Asia, including Uzbekistan, is rich in shrines where revered saints lived and were buried. Many of these burial sites have been restored to their original condition. Mausoleums of figures such as Bahauddin Naqshband, Gijduvani, Imam al-Bukhari, Shohi-Zinda, and Termizi have become important pilgrimage and spiritual centers for Muslims. During the years of independence, the state has paid great attention to religious sites, restoring and improving them, which has attracted over 1.5 billion Muslims worldwide.

To further develop pilgrimage tourism, it is necessary to focus on regional organization and development of religious tourism. In particular, attractive infrastructure should be developed to attract pilgrims from Southeast and Western Asia. This includes identifying and systematizing pilgrimage sites considered sacred by local populations, creating national and regional religious tourism maps, improving transport accessibility, and providing necessary facilities for pilgrims. Religious pilgrimage sites can become significant sources of income with relatively small investments. Tourism in general is a sector that can generate high income with limited expenditure. Uzbekistan has hundreds of religious shrines across its regions. Many sacred burial sites of prominent Islamic figures are known only at local levels, but they can be elevated to national and international pilgrimage destinations. At the same time, establishing transport routes to major pilgrimage sites and organizing interregional travel will facilitate tourism development. Numerous decrees and resolutions have been adopted to promote pilgrimage tourism in Uzbekistan, including the Presidential Decree No. 6165 dated February 9, 2021, "On Measures to Develop Domestic and Pilgrimage Tourism in the Republic of Uzbekistan," and the Cabinet of Ministers Resolution No. 100 dated February 24, 2021, "On Additional Measures for the Development of Domestic and Pilgrimage Tourism," which is currently being updated.

Conclusion

In conclusion, pilgrimage tourism is an important sector not only for spiritual enrichment through the study of religious and cultural heritage and visits to historical shrines but also for economic development. Developing this tourism sector enhances the country's international reputation, supports local entrepreneurship, and improves infrastructure. The article highlights the need to improve infrastructure, create favorable conditions for tourists, restore historical and cultural monuments, strengthen promotion, introduce digital technologies, and enhance international cooperation. The development of pilgrimage tourism promotes economic benefits, cultural exchange, and national identity, making systematic and comprehensive measures in this field a pressing task.

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