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PROBLEMS OF THE EFFECTIVE USE OF PILGRIMAGE TOURISM POTENTIAL IN UZBEKISTAN AND INCREASING INTERNATIONAL PILGRIM FLOWS

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Abstract
The thesis examines why Uzbekistan's substantial pilgrimage (ziyarat) tourism potential has not yet been converted into a proportional inflow of international pilgrims. Drawing on official statistics for 2019–2025 and on international and national scholarship, it identifies five structural constraints: the statistical invisibility of pilgrimage flows, dependence on neighbouring markets, weak air connectivity with major Muslim source markets, uneven infrastructure at sacred sites, and a shortage of specialised interpretation. Targeted measures are proposed for each constraint.

Keywords: pilgrimage tourism; ziyarat; religious heritage; international pilgrim flows; Muslim-friendly tourism; destination management; Uzbekistan.



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Introduction

Pilgrimage is one of the oldest forms of human mobility, and religiously motivated travel remains one of the most resilient segments of the global tourism market [1]. Contemporary research no longer draws a sharp line between the pilgrim and the tourist: the same visitor often combines devotion, heritage interest and leisure within a single trip, which obliges destinations to design integrated products rather than purely devotional ones [2]. The demand behind this shift is substantial. According to the Mastercard–CrescentRating Global Muslim Travel Index 2025, international Muslim arrivals reached 176 million in 2024 and are projected to grow to 245 million by 2030.

Uzbekistan holds a rare concentration of sacred sites linked to Islamic scholarship and the Sufi tradition, including the memorial complexes of Imam al-Bukhari, Bahauddin Naqshband, Imam at-Termizi and Qusam ibn Abbas. Together with Buddhist, Jewish and Zoroastrian heritage, this makes the country a genuinely multi-confessional pilgrimage destination [3]. The state has declared pilgrimage tourism a policy priority, most notably through the Presidential Decree of 9 February 2021 on further development of domestic and pilgrimage tourism. Nevertheless, national researchers conclude that the sector is still at an early stage relative to its potential [4].

The aim of this thesis is to identify the problems that limit the effective use of Uzbekistan's pilgrimage tourism potential and to substantiate measures for increasing international pilgrim flows. The study applies statistical, structural and comparative analysis to data of the National Statistics Committee for 2019–2025, national policy documents and the scholarly literature.



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Main Part

Uzbekistan's inbound tourism has grown faster than that of almost any other destination, but growth in total volume has not yet produced a proportional increase in long-haul pilgrim markets. After the pandemic collapse to 1.5 million arrivals in 2020, the country surpassed its pre-pandemic level of 6.75 million in 2024 and received a record 11.7 million foreign visitors in 2025 (Figure 1). UN Tourism placed Uzbekistan among the seven fastest-growing destinations in the world for January–September 2025. Tourism service exports reached about USD 3.5 billion in 2024, a result the President of the Republic publicly assessed as falling short of the country's potential.

The resource base for pilgrimage is broad. According to the Ministry of Tourism and Cultural Heritage, the country has 784 Islamic shrines, 19 Christian shrines and 8 objects of Buddhist cultural heritage suitable for pilgrimage visits. International research positions Uzbekistan as a destination for multi-confessional and self-organised pilgrims, for whom clustered routes and accessible information matter as much as package tours [3]. Government programmes since 2020, including the "Umrah+" initiative, have singled out pilgrimage as a priority source of further growth.

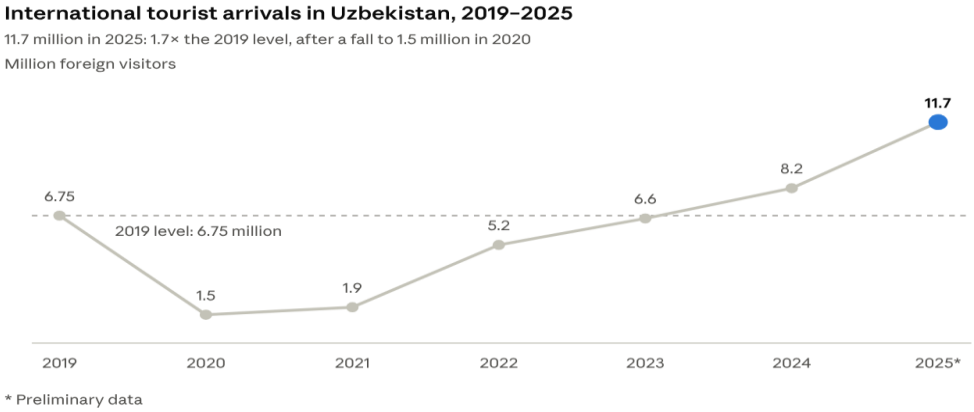


Figure 1. International tourist arrivals in Uzbekistan, 2019–2025, million people. Source: National Statistics Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan (stat.uz); 2025 — preliminary data.

The structure of demand shows why aggregate growth overstates the pilgrimage segment. In January–August 2025 more than two-thirds of foreign visitors came to see relatives, while leisure travel, the only category through which pilgrims can enter the statistics, accounted for 15.3% (Table 1).

Table 1. Foreign citizens who visited Uzbekistan by purpose of visit, January–August 2025

Purpose of visit	Visitors, persons	Share, %
Visiting relatives	5,166,373	68.7
Travel (leisure; pilgrimage is not recorded separately)	1,148,469	15.3
Official	837,535	11.1
Commercial	287,747	3.8
Medical treatment	62,054	0.8
Study	14,216	0.2
Total	**7,516,394**	**100.0**

Source: calculated by the author from data of the National Statistics Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan.

The analysis reveals five interrelated problems that constrain the conversion of potential into international pilgrim flows.

1. **Statistical invisibility of the segment.** Pilgrimage is not a separate purpose of visit in border or accommodation statistics, so the volume, origin, length of stay and spending of pilgrims are unknown. Tour operators' estimates of a 5–7% pre-pandemic share remain the main reference point, which makes policy targets impossible to monitor.

2. **Concentration on neighbouring markets.** In 2025, 81.5% of all visitors came from neighbouring countries. Core long-haul Muslim markets are absent from the top ten: all countries outside it together supplied only 4.7% of arrivals in January–August 2025, while Türkiye supplied 113,109 visitors and India 42,256. At the same time, about 7 million followers of the Naqshbandi order in Malaysia and Indonesia are reported to be interested in visiting Uzbek shrines before performing Umrah.

3. **Limited air connectivity and high travel costs.** Long-haul pilgrims depend on direct and affordable flights, and the government has repeatedly instructed agencies to expand routes from Indonesia, Malaysia, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Arab countries. The country already has strong outbound capacity on Saudi routes: about 461,500 Uzbek citizens performed Umrah in 2024, ranking Uzbekistan 10th in the world. This capacity is not yet used to channel inbound "Umrah plus Uzbekistan" itineraries.

4. **Uneven infrastructure at sacred sites.** Ablution and prayer facilities, multilingual signage, accessibility and Muslim-friendly accommodation are concentrated in Bukhara and Samarkand, while shrines in Surkhandarya, the Fergana Valley and Karakalpakstan remain underserved. Pilgrimage disproportionately attracts visitors aged over 60 [4], which raises requirements for accessibility, transport comfort and medical support. Unmanaged growth also risks the commodification of sacred space, a recurrent problem in religious destinations worldwide [1].

5. **Weak interpretation and branding.** The main motivations for visiting shrines are spiritual enrichment (60%) and cultural exploration (25%) [4], so the quality of interpretation is the core of the product. Yet there are few guides who combine religious-historical expertise with Malay, Indonesian, Urdu, Arabic or

Turkish, scholarly information on shrines and saints is fragmented, and the country still lacks a single pilgrimage brand.

Conclusions and Proposals

Uzbekistan's problem is not a lack of pilgrimage resources but a gap between those resources and the institutional, logistical and informational conditions required to turn them into long-haul flows. The record of 11.7 million arrivals in 2025 is driven mainly by neighbouring markets and family visits, while the share of international pilgrims remains unmeasured and, by available estimates, small. To close this gap, the following measures are proposed:

1. **Measure the segment.** Introduce "pilgrimage (ziyarat)" as a separate purpose of visit in the e-visa, border and accommodation registration (E-mehmon) systems, and publish an annual pilgrimage tourism indicator by country of origin, region and length of stay.
2. **Create an "Umrah+ Uzbekistan" transit product.** Agree with Saudi and Gulf carriers on stopover fares and 3–5-day itineraries for Southeast and South Asian pilgrims travelling to or from the Holy Cities, starting with the Naqshbandi communities of Malaysia and Indonesia.
3. **Expand air links with priority source markets.** Open direct and charter routes to Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur, Lahore, Dhaka, Istanbul and Gulf hubs during peak Umrah seasons, with route-development incentives tied to passenger results.
4. **Develop thematic spiritual routes instead of single-site visits.** Link clusters such as the "Seven Pirs of Bukhara", the route of the great muhaddiths from Imam al-Bukhari to Imam at-Termizi, the Naqshbandi path and a Buddhist route in Termez for East Asian visitors [3]. In line with the convergence of pilgrimage and tourism [2], each route should combine devotional visits with heritage, crafts and gastronomy.

5. **Adopt a national service standard for sacred sites.** It should cover ablution and prayer facilities, access for elderly visitors, multilingual signage, carrying-capacity limits and codes of conduct that protect the sanctity of places of worship [1].
6. **Invest in human capital and a single information platform.** Train specialised pilgrimage guides in Malay, Indonesian, Urdu, Arabic and Turkish, and launch a unified digital platform with verified scholarly information on shrines and saints under one national pilgrimage brand.

Implementing these measures would allow Uzbekistan to monitor progress transparently and to shift tourism growth from sheer volume toward higher-value international pilgrim markets.

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