

International Congress on Economics, Management and Business Studies
Hosted Online from New York, USA
Date: 23rd November, 2026
Website: https://econferencia.com

PROSPECTS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF MICE TOURISM IN UZBEKISTAN AND CURRENT CHALLENGES IN ATTRACTING INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS EVENTS

Yakhshiboyev Sunatilla Nemat o‘g‘li
Alfraganus University, Faculty of Tourism,
Master’s student, group TvM/M-25-1

Sayfutdinov Shuxratjon Sultonovich
Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Economics, Professor,
Dean of the Faculty of Tourism Alfraganus University,
Tashkent, Uzbekistan
E-mail: sh.sayfutdinov@afu.uz
ORCID: 0000-0002-8699-3861

Abstract
The paper examines the prospects for MICE (meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions) tourism in Uzbekistan and the barriers to attracting international business events. Using the convention site-selection framework and official data for 2022–2026, it assesses the national venue base, the portfolio of hosted events and the structure of inbound demand. The results show that large intergovernmental meetings dominate the portfolio, while rotating association congresses and corporate incentive travel remain underdeveloped. The main constraints are limited bidding capacity, air-access costs, a shortage of qualified MICE personnel and the absence of dedicated MICE statistics. Targeted policy measures are proposed to position Uzbekistan as the leading business-events hub of Central Asia.

Keywords: MICE tourism, business events, convention site selection, destination competitiveness, convention bureau, congress infrastructure, inbound tourism, Uzbekistan.



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Introduction

Business events have become one of the most valuable segments of international tourism. Delegates of conferences, congresses and exhibitions usually spend more per day than leisure visitors and travel outside peak seasons. Rogers and Wynn-Moylan show that the economic, social and environmental effects of the conference industry reach far beyond the venue, into hotels, transport, catering and the host city's image [2].

For Uzbekistan this segment has strategic weight. Inbound tourism reached a record 11.7 million foreign visitors in 2025, 46.8% more than in 2024. Since 2022 the country has hosted the SCO summit, the EBRD Annual Meeting, the UNWTO General Assembly and the UNESCO General Conference. Winning events in open competition, however, depends on how meeting planners judge a destination. Crouch and Ritchie group these judgements into eight factors: accessibility, local support, extra-conference opportunities, accommodation, meeting facilities, information, site environment and other criteria such as risk and novelty [1].

The aim of the paper is to assess Uzbekistan's MICE potential against these factors and to identify the problems that limit its ability to attract international business events. The study combines document analysis of state programmes, secondary statistics for 2022–2026 and a review of foreign and national scholarship.

Main Part

1. Venue base and portfolio of hosted events

Uzbekistan's MICE supply is concentrated in two hubs. The Silk Road Samarkand tourism centre, opened in August 2022 with investment of about USD 580 million, combines eight hotels with some 1,200 rooms and a congress centre of 18,000 m² (Silk Road Samarkand). Its Grand Hall seats 3,000 people in theatre style, and the centre has 13 conference and meeting rooms for parallel sessions. In Tashkent, the CAEx Uzbekistan exhibition complex hosts the country's largest business forum. Meeting facilities and accommodation, two core site-selection

factors [1], are therefore no longer the binding constraint for events of up to about 3,000 delegates.

Table 1 shows how quickly this capacity has been turned into a portfolio of high-profile meetings.

Table 1. Major international business events hosted in Uzbekistan, 2022–2026

No.	Event	Dates	City, venue	Scale	Market segment
1	SCO Heads of State Council summit	15–16 Sep 2022	Samarkand, Silk Road Samarkand	Heads of state of SCO member and partner countries	Intergovernmental
2	32nd EBRD Annual Meeting and Business Forum	16–18 May 2023	Samarkand, Silk Road Samarkand	2,500+ participants; 50+ sessions	Intergovernmental, financial
3	25th session of the UNWTO General Assembly	16–20 Oct 2023	Samarkand, International Tourism Centre	Delegations from 117 countries; 70 at ministerial level	Intergovernmental
4	43rd session of the UNESCO General Conference	30 Oct – 13 Nov 2025	Samarkand, Silk Road Samarkand Congress Centre	4,600+ delegates from 180+ member states	Intergovernmental
5	5th Tashkent International Investment Forum	16–18 Jun 2026	Tashkent, CAEx Uzbekistan	10,409 registered; 3,802 foreign delegates from 102 countries	Government-led business forum
6	STEAM AHEAD Global Finals and YALA	Dec 2026	Tashkent	2,300+ finalists; 4,000+ visitors expected	International education event, private organiser

Source: compiled by the author from EBRD meeting results, UNWTO General Assembly, UNESCO General Conference, TIIF 2026 and Tourism Committee.

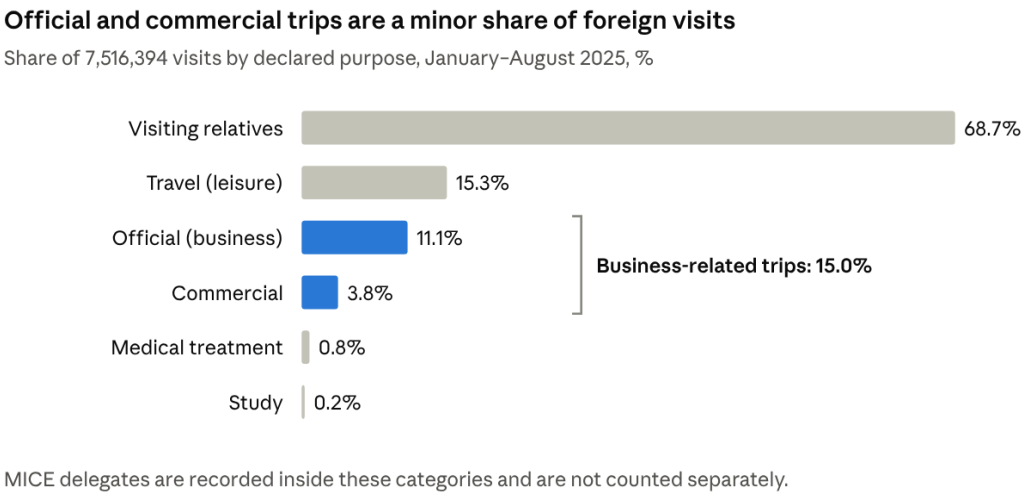
The portfolio is impressive but narrow. Five of the six events were initiated or led by the state, and four were intergovernmental sessions won through diplomacy rather than competitive bidding. The UNESCO session, the first held outside Paris since 1985, proved that Samarkand can run a two-week meeting for more than 4,600 delegates. Yet rotating association congresses and corporate incentive

programmes, which Rogers and Wynn-Moylan treat as the two core buyer markets of the conference industry [2], are still largely missing. Only the 2026 STEAM AHEAD finals, secured with the support of the Uzbekistan Convention Bureau, signal a shift towards events brought in by private organisers.

2. Structure of inbound demand

Inbound demand is growing fast: 7.5 million foreign visits in January–August 2025, 49.1% more than a year earlier (National Statistics Committee). Its structure, however, is shaped by short trips from neighbouring countries, which supplied 81.5% of all visitors in 2025 (Kun.uz). Figure 1 shows how visits divide by declared purpose.

Figure 1. Foreign visits to Uzbekistan by purpose of travel, January–August 2025



Source: computed by the author from National Statistics Committee data, January–August 2025.

Visiting relatives account for more than two-thirds of all visits. Official and commercial trips, the only categories that contain business-event delegates, form a small segment that current statistics cannot break down further. This is the market MICE policy must enlarge: high-spending, long-haul visitors who travel for meetings rather than for family or transit reasons.

3. Problems in attracting international business events

Measured against the site-selection factors [1], Uzbekistan's weak points lie less in its venues than in the "soft" elements of the destination offer. Five problems stand out.

1. **Limited bidding capacity and market intelligence.** The Project Office under the Tourism Committee joined the International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA) only in August 2026 (Dunyo). Without a record in the ICCA association database, the country rarely reaches the shortlists of rotating congresses. Promotion still relies mainly on national stands at trade fairs such as IMEX and the Meet Global MICE Congress.

2. **Accessibility and travel cost.** Direct long-haul connections to Tashkent and Samarkand remain limited, which raises the time and cost of attendance for delegates from Europe and East Asia. In 2026 the government introduced a USD 100 subsidy per tourist on new air routes, which confirms that connectivity is a recognised constraint. Visa barriers have fallen faster: 30-day visa-free entry now covers, among others, the United States, China, Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Safaeva et al. name visa simplification and price incentives as priority levers of the international competitiveness of the national tourism and hospitality industry [3].

3. **Shortage of qualified personnel.** Xalimova identifies the lack of MICE-specialised university programmes, low foreign-language proficiency and a weak service culture as the main human-capital problems [4]. At the Meet Global MICE Congress in December 2025 the country was represented by only three exhibitors: Sanat Travel Experts DMC, Inter MICE Asia and Silk Road Samarkand.

4. **No dedicated MICE statistics.** Official data record trips by purpose but not participation in business events. The "official" category, 11.1% of visits in January–August 2025, mixes diplomatic, corporate and conference travel (Figure 1). Without counts of events, delegates and spending, the economic impact cannot be measured or targeted.

5. **Spatial and seasonal concentration.** Almost all large events are held at one complex in Samarkand, while Bukhara and Khiva lack congress facilities of

international scale. This limits post-event tours and leaves the off-season capacity of other cities unused, although business events are among the best tools for smoothing seasonality [2].

Conclusions and recommendations

Within four years Uzbekistan has moved from having no congress infrastructure of international scale to hosting global meetings such as the UNESCO General Conference. The next task is to turn one-off diplomatic successes into a steady flow of competitively won association, corporate and exhibition events. Existing incentives give a basis for this: from 1 April 2026, organisers of MICE events that bring at least 100 foreign participants receive a 50% refund of VAT (Kun.uz). The following measures are proposed.

1. Develop the Uzbekistan Convention Bureau into a public–private body with a multi-year bidding fund and annual targets for bids to rotating association congresses, using the new ICCA membership.
2. Launch a congress ambassador programme that helps Uzbek scientists and professional associations bring their international meetings to the country, strengthening the "local support" factor [1].
3. Agree MICE air packages with national and foreign carriers: delegate fares, free stopovers and extension of the per-tourist route subsidy to certified business events.
4. Introduce dedicated MICE statistics: a separate "business event" purpose in border and hotel registration and an annual report on events, delegates and spending.
5. Open MICE specialisations in tourism universities, with professional certification and foreign-language training for event staff [4].
6. Spread capacity beyond Samarkand by building congress hotels in Bukhara and Khiva and selling pre- and post-event heritage tours and incentive programmes.

Together these steps would let Uzbekistan compete in the association and corporate markets [2] and raise the share of high-spending business visitors in its inbound flow.

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