ECOTOURISM IN UZBEKISTAN: GLOBAL TRENDS, NATIONAL RESOURCES, AND STRATEGIC OUTLOOK

Khayrullaeva Nilufarbegim Nematillo kizi
Lecturer of BukhSU, Faculty of Economy and Tourism, Bukhara, Uzbekistan
xayrullayevan@gmail.com
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Introduction. The global travel and tourism industry is at a defining moment. After the profound disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the sector has not only recovered but has been rapidly reshaped by a new set of priorities that place sustainability and responsibility at its core. Ecotourism — defined by the International Ecotourism Society (TIES) as "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education" — has emerged as one of the fastest-growing segments of the global travel market. This paper provides a comprehensive examination of ecotourism from both a global and Uzbek perspective. It begins with an overview of global tourism recovery and the growth of the ecotourism market, supported by statistical tables and trend analysis. It then focuses on Uzbekistan, a Central Asian nation that has witnessed an extraordinary tourism boom in recent years. The paper details the country's rich ecotourism resources — including its national parks, protected areas, mountain ranges, and desert landscapes — and analyses how the government has integrated ecotourism into its national development strategy. Specific attention is given to flagship projects such as the Bakhmal Eco-Village, the Suffa Shalle cottage complex, and the Aidar-Arnasay lake system cluster. The environmental challenges facing Uzbekistan — including desertification, Aral Sea degradation, and infrastructure gaps — are examined alongside ongoing conservation initiatives such as the "Yashil Makon" (Green Space) national reforestation program. Finally, the paper explores future prospects and provides recommendations to ensure that Uzbekistan's rapid tourism growth follows a truly sustainable, equitable, and resilient path.

The international tourism industry staged a remarkable recovery in 2025, surpassing even the most optimistic projections. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), international tourist arrivals grew by 4% in 2025 compared to 2024, reflecting sustained global travel demand despite ongoing economic pressures and geopolitical uncertainties. In the first quarter of 2025 alone, arrivals increased by 5% compared to the same period in 2024, even surpassed pre-pandemic 2019 levels by 3%. The momentum carried through the remainder of the year, with total global tourism revenue exceeding $2.2 trillion and international travellers numbering 1.52 billion. Looking ahead, the UNWTO forecasts further growth of 3% to 4% in 2026, driven by expanding global connectivity, improved sustainable travel options, and continued economic recovery across major source markets.

Within this broader recovery, however, a more specific transformation is underway: the rapid rise of ecotourism as a preferred mode of travel, particularly among younger demographics. The global ecotourism market has been growing at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) far exceeding that of conventional tourism. As of 2025, the market was valued between $278 billion and $295 billion, depending on the source, with a projected annual growth rate of approximately 15%. By 2030, the market is expected to reach roughly $490 billion, and by 2034, some forecasts place it at $1.1 trillion. This growth is not merely a statistical artefact; it is driven by fundamental shifts in traveller values and preferences. Increasing environmental awareness, the rise of eco-lodges and green hotels, a growing interest in wildlife conservation, and the demand for authentic, educational,

and immersive travel experiences are fueling this expansion. Younger travellers — particularly Millennials and Generation Z — are leading this shift, often prioritising sustainability credentials over luxury amenities. As one industry report notes, "The rise of eco-friendly accommodations, wildlife conservation initiatives, and responsible tour operators offering educational experiences" has become a defining feature of the contemporary travel landscape.

While the global ecotourism narrative provides an important backdrop, the most dramatic story in Central Asia is unfolding in Uzbekistan. Over the past eight years, the country has transformed itself from a relatively isolated destination into one of the world's fastest-growing tourism markets. The numbers are striking. In 2025, Uzbekistan welcomed 11.7 million international visitors — a 333.3% increase compared to 2017 (when only 2.7 million tourists arrived). This represents a 4.3-fold expansion over the country's pre-pandemic figures. Even more significantly, the government had initially set a target of 10 million foreign tourists for 2025; by November of that year, arrivals had already reached 10.7 million, surpassing the target ahead of schedule.

The foundation of any successful ecotourism strategy lies in natural assets, and in this regard, Uzbekistan is extraordinarily well-endowed. Despite being a landlocked country, it possesses an exceptional diversity of ecosystems ranging from snow-capped mountain peaks to vast sand deserts, from alpine meadows to tugai floodplain forests. This diversity is not merely a matter of aesthetics; it is ecologically significant, containing endemic species, critical bird habitats, and landscapes of global importance.

Uzbekistan is home to several nationally protected areas that serve as the backbone of its ecotourism infrastructure:

Ugam-Chatkal State National Natural Park, located approximately 80 kilometers east of Tashkent in the Western Tien Shan mountain range, is the country's premier destination for mountain ecotourism. The park is part of a UNESCO World Heritage Site and features dramatic landscapes of turquoise lakes, deep river valleys, and peaks rising to over 3,300 meters. Visitors can hike through forests of juniper and walnut, observe rare animal species, and explore waterfalls such as Tavaksay. The nearby Charvak Reservoir offers opportunities for water-based recreation, while the Chimgan-Beldersay area has become a hub for trekking, mountain biking, and winter sports.

Zaamin National Park, located in the Jizzakh Region, is one of Uzbekistan's most biologically diverse protected areas. Known for its rare juniper forests and alpine meadows, the park is a haven for birdwatchers, who can spot species such as the golden eagle, lammergeier, and Himalayan snowcock. Zaamin is also culturally significant, with its mountain springs believed to possess healing properties, attracting both ecotourists and wellness travelers. The park is currently undergoing significant infrastructure development as part of the government's regional tourism strategy.

The Kyzylkum Desert offers an entirely different ecotourism experience. Covering a vast area in central Uzbekistan, this desert ecosystem supports a surprising diversity of wildlife, including the iconic Bactrian camel, goitered gazelles, and a variety of reptiles and bird species. Desert ecotourism experiences focus on camel trekking, night sky observation (the area has minimal light pollution), and visits to remote yurt camps where travelers can experience traditional nomadic culture.

Kitab State Geological Reserve, located in the Kashkadarya Region, offers a different kind of ecotourism: geotourism. The reserve is famous for its exposed geological sections, which provide a continuous record of Earth's history spanning millions of years. It is a destination for geology

enthusiasts, students, and researchers, and offers opportunities to combine scientific education with outdoor recreation.

Badai-Tugay Nature Reserve, also located in the lower Amu Darya region, is another important protected area focused on the conservation of tugai forests. It plays a key role in preserving the region's unique biodiversity while offering limited but growing opportunities for ecotourism.

Beyond the formal protected area network, many other regions offer exceptional ecotourism potential. The Nuratau Mountain Range, for example, has become a focus for community-based ecotourism, with local homestays and guided treks that allow visitors to experience traditional mountain life while contributing directly to local economies. The area is also part of a UNESCO Man and Biosphere Reserve, recognising its importance for both biodiversity and sustainable development. The Baysun Mountains in Surkhandarya Region are similarly rich in both natural beauty and cultural heritage, with ancient petroglyphs, traditional villages, and a high degree of endemism in plant species.

At the strategic level, Uzbekistan has developed a Tourism Development Strategy for 2026–2030, which was discussed and refined in consultations with the scientific community and regional authorities. The strategy sets ambitious targets:

- Increase the annual number of foreign tourists to 20 million by 2030.
- Raise tourism export revenues to at least $6 billion, driven by higher-value products and longer visitor stays.
- Create 4,000 new hotels, guesthouses, and hostels across the country's regions, with a particular focus on four- and five-star accommodations.
- Expand domestic flight routes and improve transport links to connect remote ecotourism destinations.

The strategy explicitly prioritizes ecotourism alongside other specialized segments such as film tourism and the development of regional tourism clusters. This reflects a recognition that Uzbekistan's long-term competitiveness depends on diversifying beyond the traditional Silk Road circuit and offering unique, sustainable experiences that cannot be easily replicated elsewhere.

The most ambitious project currently under development is the Bakhmal Eco-Village, located in the mountainous Bakhmal District of Jizzakh Region. The project, launched in 2025, aims to create a comprehensive ecotourism cluster on a 40-hectare site adjacent to the Zaamin-Bakhmal State Nature Reserve. The village is being designed according to ecological principles, emphasising low-impact construction, renewable energy systems, and local materials and traditional architecture. It will include a visitor information center, eco-lodges, hiking trails, horse-riding routes, and facilities for camping and outdoor activities.

The economic impact of Bakhmal's ecotourism development has already been significant. Between January and October 2025, the district generated $6 million in tourism export revenue, driven largely by growth in sports, pilgrimage, and ecotourism. The village of Jum-Jum has become a focal point for sports and outdoor activities, attracting both domestic and international visitors. Bakhmal is renowned not only for its scenic mountains but also for its historical monuments and sacred sites — including "Novka Ota," "Usmat Ota," and others — as well as over 60 archaeological landmarks. This combination of natural and cultural assets has made Bakhmal one of the most promising ecotourism destinations in the country.

The Zaamin district, which shares the same mountain range as Bakhmal, has also seen intensive development. In the third quarter of 2025, the "Suffa Shalle" cottage complex is scheduled

to open within the Zaamin tourist and recreational zone. This complex will provide modern accommodations designed to blend with the natural landscape while offering visitors access to the national park's hiking trails, birdwatching sites, and scenic viewpoints. The development is part of a broader investment program that has attracted international investor interest. The "Jizzakh-2025" International Business Forum, held in Zaamin, drew over 200 top executives and investors from more than 30 countries, with ecotourism and hospitality investments prominently featured on the agenda.

The third major project in the Jizzakh Region involves the Aidar-Arnasay lake system, a large artificial reservoir created by drainage water from agricultural irrigation. Rather than viewing this as an environmental problem, the government has recognized the lake system's potential for water-based ecotourism and recreation. During a working visit to the area, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev was presented with plans to develop a modern tourist cluster on the lake's shoreline. A coastal tourism complex and health centre are planned to create jobs, generate local income, and provide new recreational opportunities for both domestic and international tourists.

Despite its extraordinary potential, Uzbekistan's ecotourism development faces significant environmental challenges. Many of these challenges predate the tourism boom and are rooted in the legacy of Soviet-era industrialization and agricultural policies. Addressing them is not only a prerequisite for sustainable tourism but a matter of urgent national importance.

In response to these challenges, Uzbekistan has launched several significant conservation initiatives. The most prominent is the "Yashil Makon" (Green Space) national project, initiated by President Mirziyoyev, which aims to increase the country's green cover, mitigate climate change, and enhance environmental resilience. In spring 2025 alone, 137 million trees and shrubs were planted across the country, and 55 new "green parks" were established. The project has a long-term target of increasing Uzbekistan's green cover from 14.2% to 30% and raising the availability of green space to 9–10 square meters per person. The "Yashil Makon" initiative is directly relevant to ecotourism, as many of the newly planted areas are being developed into recreational spaces with visitor facilities. The government has also given botanical gardens and dendrological parks "untouchable" status to prevent privatization, ensuring that these green spaces remain permanently accessible to the public.

Lack of regulation: While the 2025 eco-zone regulation was an important step, many areas still lack clear rules for tourism operations. In some protected areas, commercial tour operators have been able to operate with minimal oversight, leading to conflicts with conservation objectives.

Inadequate infrastructure: Many of Uzbekistan's most beautiful natural areas are remote and lack basic infrastructure: marked trails, visitor centers, waste management systems, and emergency services. This limits the number of visitors that can be accommodated and creates safety concerns for independent travelers.

Financial sustainability: Ecotourism operations require investment, but returns may take years to materialize. Small operators struggle to access financing, and there are few mechanisms to ensure that tourism revenues are channeled back into conservation.

Looking forward, the future of ecotourism in Uzbekistan appears bright, but realizing that potential will require continued commitment and strategic action. Several positive trends are already visible.

Investment momentum: The successful hosting of investment forums such as "Jizzakh-2025" — with participants from more than 30 countries — demonstrates that international investors see

potential in Uzbekistan's ecotourism sector. As projects such as Bakhmal Eco-Village and Suffa Shalle come online, they will serve as models that can be replicated elsewhere.

Integration with broader development: Ecotourism is not developed in isolation but as part of a larger regional development strategy, job creation, and poverty reduction. The goal of creating 4,000 new hotels and guesthouses across the regions will, if achieved, distribute economic benefits far beyond the capital city.

Based on the analysis above, the following recommendations are offered to policymakers, investors, and practitioners working to develop ecotourism in Uzbekistan:

1. Strengthen protected area management before scaling up visitor numbers. Effective ecotourism requires functioning management systems: trained rangers, clear zoning, visitor monitoring, and revenue retention mechanisms that channel tourism income back into conservation.

2. Expand certification and quality standards for ecotourism operators. A national ecotourism certification program — similar to the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism — would help travelers identify responsible operators and would incentivize businesses to improve their environmental performance.

3. Prioritize local community benefit. Ecotourism's legitimacy depends on delivering tangible benefits to local people. This means favoring community-based accommodation, sourcing food and supplies locally, employing local guides and staff, and involving communities in planning and decision-making.

4. Invest in training and capacity building at the local level. Rural communities need access to training in hospitality management, guiding, conservation monitoring, and business development. University programs and vocational centers should expand their ecotourism curricula.

5. Improve last-mile infrastructure without overbuilding. Well-designed trails, simple but comfortable visitor facilities, and reliable waste management systems are essential — but they should be appropriate to the setting, not over-scaled or overly urbanized.

6. Address the regulatory fragmentation that currently exists. The 2025 eco-zone regulation was an excellent start, but overlapping jurisdiction between different agencies remains a challenge. A "one-stop" permitting system for ecotourism operations would simplify compliance and encourage investment.

7. Monitor and adapt. Ecotourism is not a static formula; it requires continuous monitoring of environmental, social, and economic indicators, with adaptive management that adjusts policies as conditions change.

Conclusion. Uzbekistan stands at a pivotal moment in its development as a tourism destination. The remarkable growth of the past eight years — from 2.7 million visitors in 2017 to 11.7 million in 2025 — demonstrates the country's appeal and its ability to execute an ambitious national strategy. The government has put in place the institutional framework, the strategic targets, and the flagship projects needed to continue this momentum. At the same time, the growing global demand for ecotourism offers an unprecedented opportunity for Uzbekistan to differentiate itself from mass-market destinations and to build a tourism sector that is not only economically productive but also environmentally sustainable and socially equitable.

The challenges are real: desertification, infrastructure gaps, institutional fragmentation, and the need for capacity building at the local level. But these are not insurmountable. With continued commitment, strategic investment, and a genuine partnership between government, private sector, local communities, and international partners, Uzbekistan can become a global model for how a

country can transform its tourism sector — from the Silk Road to sustainable trails, from ancient cities to living landscapes. The journey has begun. The direction is clear. And the destination — for travelers, for communities, and for nature — is worth striving for.

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