

# New Prospects for the Development of Tourism in Uzbekistan

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**Abstract:** The article examines the trend of tourism development before the introduction of quarantine measures in the world. The authors tell about the reforms carried out by the government of Uzbekistan in recent years in the field of tourism. The impact and consequences of the global pandemic on the tourism industry of Uzbekistan are also presented. The authors see it as a possible promising direction for the reanimation of tourism to attract a new category of travelers - participants in world rallies who use the route of the Great Silk Road.

**Keywords:** Tourism, quarantine, pandemic, crisis, rally, the Great Silk Road, self-isolation, travelers, economy, international tourism, Brexit, tour operators, airlines, hotel services, guides and translators, cafes and restaurants, concerts, public events.

Prior to the pandemic, tourism was one of the leading sectors worldwide. However, the announced quarantine in 2020 brought the tourism industry into a severe crisis situation in almost all countries. Living in self-isolation during the pandemic has greatly affected all sectors of the economy.

The development of mass tourism has become a phenomenal fact of the 20th century, and according to the expectations of experts, the 21st century was to become the century of tourism. The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) registered 1.5 billion international tourist trips worldwide in 2019. A four percent increase over the previous year indicated that tourism was a leading and resilient sector of the economy (Figure 1).

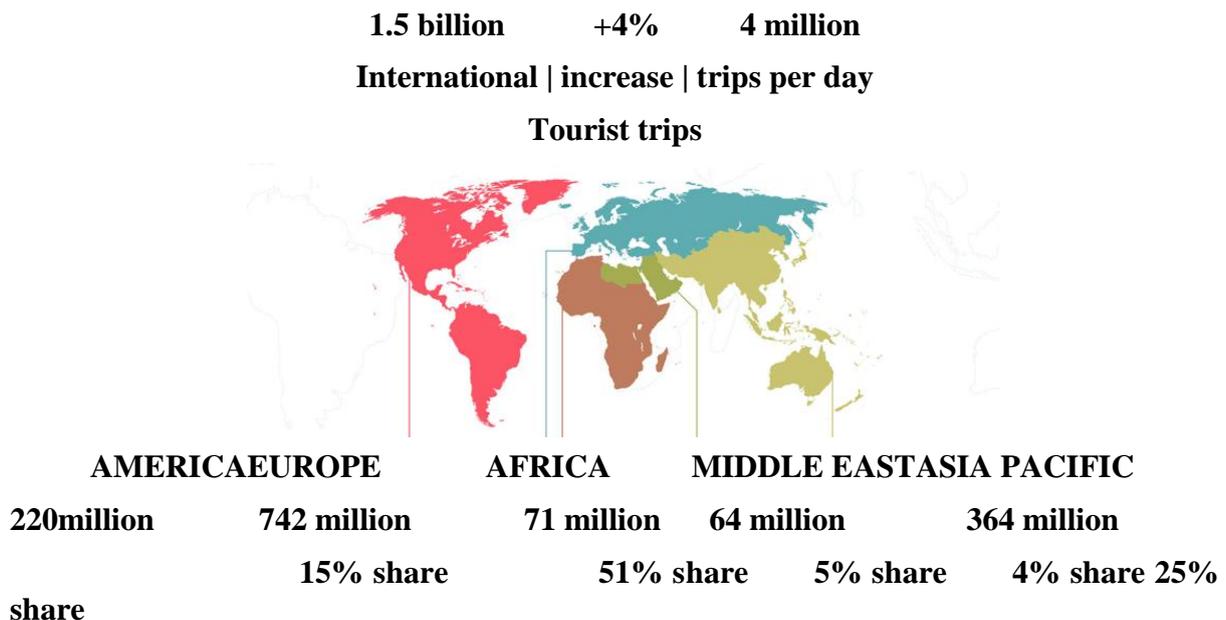


Figure 1. Overview of international tourism travel in 2019. (Source: (c) World Tourism Organization)

All regions experienced growth in international tourism, with Brexit uncertainty, the collapse of tour operator Thomas Cook, geopolitical and social tensions, and the global economic downturn all contributing to some slowdown in 2019 compared with the exceptional pace of 2017 and 2018. The Middle East was the fastest growing region in international tourist travel in 2019, nearly doubling the global average (+8%) (Figure 1).

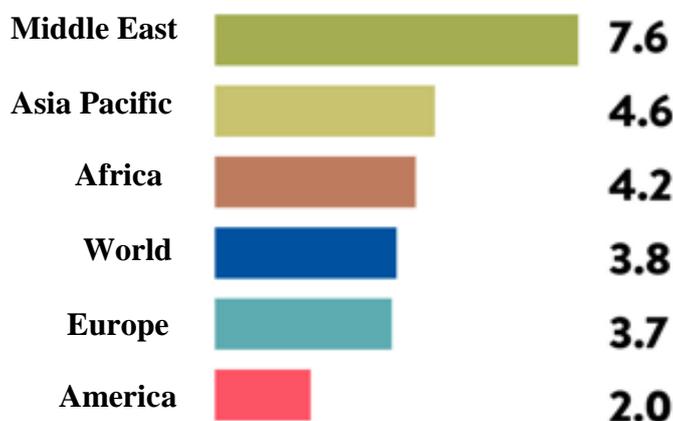


Figure 2. International Tourism Travel in 2019 - Change by Region (%) (Source: (c) World Tourism Organization)

In 2020, the UNWTO Confidence Index predicted growth from 3% to 4%, major sporting events were expected, including the Tokyo Olympics, and cultural events, such as EXPO 2020 in Dubai.

However, the sudden announcement of the lockdown has upset the expectations of many countries, tour operators and travelers. Travelers stopped using the services of tour operators, airlines, hotel services, guides and translators, eat in cafes and restaurants, go to concerts and other public events.

Governments around the world have had to prioritize public health while protecting jobs and businesses. The sharp decline in the tourism market has endangered the livelihoods of the population employed in this industry. The tourism business was in a quandary.

The consequences of Covid-19 for international tourism became visible after the report of the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO). The data show that expenditures as of May 2020 were already three times those associated with the 2009 global economic crisis. As the situation continues to evolve, the United Nations specialized agency has provided the first comprehensive view of the impact of the pandemic on both tourist numbers and lost income ahead of the upcoming release of the latest information on travel restrictions around the world.

The 2020 edition of the UNWTO World Tourism Barometer shows that the near total lockdown imposed in response to the pandemic resulted in a 98% drop in international tourist arrivals in May compared to 2019. The barometer also shows an increase of 56% year on year. This means a loss of 300 million tourists and a loss of US\$320 billion in international tourism revenue, more than three times the loss during the 2009 global economic crisis.

Following the example of many, since March 16, 2020, Uzbekistan has also closed to foreign and local tourists. As a result, more than 1.5 thousand tour operators and 1.2 thousand hotels were forced to suspend their activities.

These measures seriously affected the incomes of more than 250 thousand people, including guides, translators, artisans, workers of architectural monuments and museums, resort institutions, catering facilities, transport and others.

In recent years, the country has carried out large-scale reforms in the tourism sector. The introduction of a visa-free stay of up to 30 days for many countries, a simplified procedure for registering guest houses, improving the provision of transport services, simplifying the licensing of guides and interpreters, etc. In 2019, a new Law "On Tourism" was adopted to replace the old one, which had been in force since 1999. The new Law takes into account the requirements of the modern tourism industry, and the concept of "independent tourism" was also introduced - which was not previously in any legal act of the country. All of these measures had positive results, and the sharp increase in the number of incoming tourists can be judged on the correctness of the reforms (Table 1).

According to official statistics, in recent years, before the introduction of the self-isolation regime, the tourism sector has developed at a rapid pace. The increase in foreign tourists who entered Uzbekistan in 2018 amounted to 198.7%, that is, the number of tourists doubled. In 2019 the growth of this indicator was about 126% (Table 1). At the end of 2020, as a result of quarantine measures in most countries, the number of tourists decreased by 4.5 times compared to 2018, which was a heavy blow for the entire tourism sector.

*Table 1. The number of foreign citizens who entered the Republic of Uzbekistan (for tourism purposes) in 2018-2020 (thousand people)*

|                                       | 2018            |          | 2019            |          | 2020            |          |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------|----------|-----------------|----------|-----------------|----------|
|                                       | thousand people | increase | thousand people | increase | thousand people | increase |
| <b>Total foreign citizens entered</b> | 5346,3          | 198,7 %  | 6748,5          | 126 %    | 1504,1          | 22,3%    |

To mitigate the effects of the pandemic, a number of preferences have been granted by the government to the tourism industry. In particular, 1,750 companies were granted property tax, land and social tax benefits in the amount of about US\$6 million. But these benefits and preferences are temporary. For continuous sustainable development, businesses need to learn how to work in a pandemic.

But still, today there is a question of resuming tourism as soon as it becomes safe and possible. The UNWTO Confidence Index fell to record lows for both the January-April 2020 assessment and the May-August outlook. Most members of the UNWTO Tourism Panel expect international tourism to recover by the second half of 2021.

Border closures, the inability to travel, self-isolation and social distancing have led to Airbnb Online Experiences: now you can make coffee with a professional barista, meditate with a Buddhist monk from Japan, meet penguins, train with Olympians - all online. You can choose from 50 Airbnb virtual projects spanning over 30 countries. All activities will be conducted through Zoom, and the cost of participation varies from \$1 to \$40.

The annual Tashkent International Tourism Fair "Tourism on the Silk Road" plays a significant role in ensuring the accelerated development of the tourism sector of Uzbekistan, shaping and maintaining the country's image in the world market. Today it is the largest

forum in Central Asia where industry professionals meet and negotiations are held in various formats.

At the same time, Uzbekistan should make the most of the opportunities for traveling along the Great Silk Road. For example, the Silk Road International Rally, traditionally held in the middle of summer, annually hosts participants from more than 40 countries, exhibiting the best racing equipment - motorcycles, ATVs, SUVs and trucks. Within two weeks, the route of the rally crosses the territories of several countries, and the event is watched by millions of TV viewers around the world. In 2021, the rally route is planned to include regions that were not previously used in other editions of the rally raid: Altai in Russia, Mongolian Altai and Gobi (Figure 3).

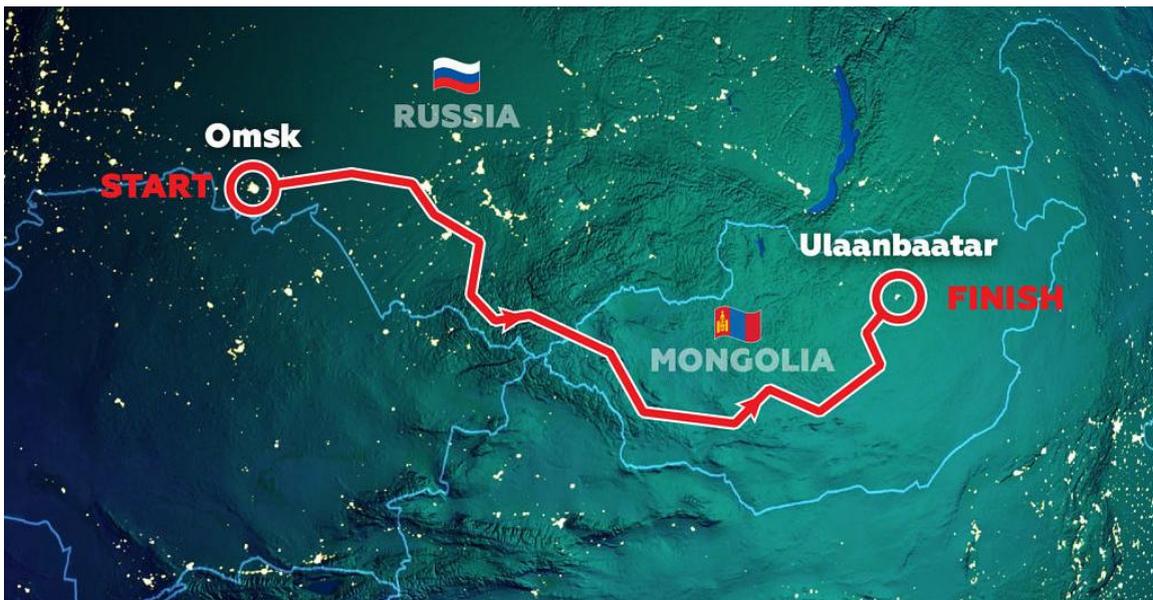


Figure 3. Route map of the Silk Road International Rally

Perhaps Uzbekistan and other countries of Central Asia should join this rally, which would be an additional help in attracting a new category of travelers.

Another adventurous race is called Mongol Rally, where participants are given 60 days to travel and it doesn't matter at the finish line whether the car will cross the finish line under its own power or it will be towed to.

The meaning of the rally is to drive from Europe to the capital of Mongolia in old small cars, after the departure of the crew from the start, each participant independently builds a route to the finish line. There are several main routes the participants take. The northern route - goes through Moscow, to Altai and further to Mongolia. The southern route is through Turkey, Iran, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Altai and Mongolia. This route is the most beautiful and difficult and many teams stick to it. It repeats the Great Silk Road. Teams, as a rule, travel separately, but are grouped before the border with Iran or in Uzbekistan. This rally is also an interesting solution to attract participants to Uzbekistan.

Trends in the world are such that most countries which focused on the development of the tourism sector took advantage of the crisis lull to accelerate the reboot of the industry and change approaches to organizing tourism.

Today, experts point to a number of existing risks, such as travel restrictions and border closures, which are still in place in most countries, depending on the epidemiological situation. However, the gradual increase in the number of flights between countries gives

hope for the revival of the tourism sector in the future. And a possible solution in this situation is the development of special types of tourism to attract a new segment of travelers. What is clear is that travel will become more personal and virtual.

Virtual travel in the near future will become a good auxiliary tool in choosing a real trip, but of course not a replacement for it, although these digital technologies will slightly reduce the size of the excursion tour market.

The course towards individualism increases the interest in traveling by car. In the post-pandemic period, they are gaining popularity due to maximum security and because most borders remain closed. Auto travel gives you the opportunity to go anywhere on your own, rather than walking around a crowded city or sunbathing on a crowded beach.

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