

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Use of Pilgrimage Tourism Resources in The Cities of Bukhara And Samarkand: A Comparative Analysis

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Abstract

This article presents a comparative analysis of the extent to which pilgrimage tourism resources are utilized in the cities of Bukhara and Samarkand. Based on the results of field research, structured interviews, and a pilgrim survey, differences between the two cities in terms of tourist flow, infrastructure, and service quality were identified. According to the findings, uniting the two cities within a single "pilgrimage corridor" concept, creating a unified marketing brand, and improving transport connectivity would allow for a more effective use of the region's tourism potential.

KEY WORDS

Pilgrimage tourism, Bukhara, Samarkand, tourism cluster, regional tourism management, tourism infrastructure, pilgrim flow.

INTRODUCTION

The cities of Bukhara and Samarkand are known not only for their architectural monuments of world significance but also as a region hosting some of the most important shrines in the Islamic world. For thousands of years, these two cities have served as centers of scholarship, trade, and religious life, and their historical and spiritual heritage remains today a focal point of attraction for millions of Muslims and history enthusiasts alike. Sites such as the Bahaiddin Naqshband complex, the Chor Bakr architectural ensemble, the Mausoleum of Khoja Doniyor, and the memorial complex of Imam Bukhari attract thousands of domestic and foreign pilgrims every year.

Historically, Bukhara developed as the birthplace of the Naqshbandi Sufi order, while Samarkand emerged as a center of scholarship and architecture during the era of Amir Timur. This historical and cultural distinction between the two cities is still reflected in their tourism profiles today: Bukhara is perceived primarily as a center of Sufi and mystical pilgrimage, while Samarkand is perceived as a center of historical,

architectural, and scholarly heritage. Understanding these differences is of considerable importance in developing an appropriate development strategy for each city.

The effective management of regional tourism resources has become one of the priority directions of Uzbekistan's tourism policy today. Both Bukhara and Samarkand possess distinct historical and cultural characteristics, and the extent and methods by which their tourism potential is utilized differ from one another. Accordingly, a comparative analysis of the two cities — identifying the strengths and weaknesses of each region and examining opportunities for mutual exchange of experience — is of considerable scientific and practical importance.

The relevance of this study lies in the fact that the management of pilgrimage tourism resources at the regional level has not yet been sufficiently studied from a scientific standpoint. Most existing research focuses on analyzing trends at the overall national level, while in-depth comparative

analyses at the level of individual cities or regions remain rare. In order to fill this gap, the present article provides a detailed analysis of the extent to which pilgrimage tourism resources are utilized, using the cities of Bukhara and Samarkand as case studies.

The purpose of the study is to conduct a comparative assessment of the degree to which pilgrimage tourism potential is utilized in the two cities, to identify the causes of existing disparities, and to develop targeted development directions for each region. The following research objectives were defined: to assess the tourism infrastructure of the main shrines in the two cities; to collect and analyze statistical data on pilgrim flows and their expenditures; to study the opinions of local tourism specialists; and to develop practical recommendations on the basis of the findings obtained.

Theoretical Foundations of the Study

The theory of regional tourism resource management has developed at the intersection of tourism geography and regional economics, examining the territorial distribution of tourism resources, their interconnection, and processes of integration. In international practice, the concepts of “tourism cluster” and “tourism corridor” are widely used, referring to an approach aimed at achieving synergistic effects by uniting geographically proximate tourism sites within a single route and management system.

Such a clustering approach is of particular importance in the context of pilgrimage tourism, since pilgrims typically prefer to visit several sacred sites in succession. Accordingly, the idea of uniting cities such as Bukhara and Samarkand — located relatively close to one another (approximately 270 km apart) — within a single “pilgrimage corridor” concept is consistent with approaches widely applied in international practice.

A review of the literature indicates that successful tourism clusters typically possess three core components: a unified transport and logistics system, an integrated marketing strategy, and a consistent standard of service quality. Assessing the extent to which each of these components has been developed along the Bukhara–Samarkand corridor constitutes one of the central issues of this study. In international practice, religious corridor projects such as Spain’s “Camino de Santiago” or Italy’s “Way of St. Francis” have succeeded in uniting several cities and regions within a single pilgrimage route, attracting millions of pilgrims annually.

Such international experiences demonstrate that multi-city routes united under a single brand achieve considerably higher marketing effectiveness than individual sites, as they offer pilgrims a coherent and complete travel experience. In the context of Uzbekistan, the formation of a Bukhara–Samarkand corridor (which could in the future also encompass cities such as Termez and Khiva) requires a similarly strategic approach.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted using a combination of several methods. First, secondary data analysis was carried out, examining official reports of the Bukhara and Samarkand regional statistical departments for the period 2022–2025. Second, the field research method was applied: throughout 2024, direct observations were conducted, and visitor numbers recorded, at 12 sacred sites in each of the two cities, amounting to 24 sites in total.

Third, the structured interview method was used, involving conversations with 40 tourism sector representatives (guides, hotel staff, artisans, and local government officials) active in the two cities. Fourth, in order to examine pilgrims’ direct experience, a survey was conducted among a total of 180 foreign and domestic pilgrims across the two cities, addressing questions on their length of stay, expenditures, and level of satisfaction.

For the purposes of comparative analysis, indicators of pilgrim flow, average length of stay, expenditure on the local economy, and service quality were calculated separately for each city and then compared. To ensure the reliability of the data, statistical data were cross-checked against the results of the survey and interviews (a triangulation approach). In addition, the tourism development plans of local government authorities in both cities were reviewed, which made it possible to assess the relationship between official policy and practical outcomes.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Comparative Indicators of Pilgrim Flow and Length of Stay

The analysis revealed that the average length of stay of visitors to shrines in Bukhara is 1.8 days, compared to 2.3 days in Samarkand. This difference is explained by the fact that Samarkand’s overall tourism infrastructure (number and quality of hotels, transport system, and variety of dining establishments) is considerably more developed than that of Bukhara.

Indicator	Bukhara	Samarkand
Average length of stay (days)	1.8	2.3
Annual number of pilgrims (thousands)	310	285
Share of shrine visits in total tourist flow, %	41	29
Average daily expenditure (USD)	32	45
Number of hotels (3-star and above)	48	76
Number of foreign-language-speaking guides	62	94

The table data show that the share of shrine visits within the overall tourist flow is higher in Bukhara (41 percent), confirming the city's status specifically as a center of religious and educational pilgrimage tourism. In Samarkand, by contrast, historical and architectural tourism dominates the composition of the tourist flow, with pilgrimage-related visits accounting for a relatively smaller share; nevertheless, in absolute terms, this figure remains substantial as well. Furthermore, the larger number of foreign-language-speaking guides in Samarkand indicates that the city has integrated into the international tourism market earlier and more actively.

Analysis of Infrastructure and Service Quality

In both cities, the shortage of supplementary services around shrines was identified as the main problem. Specifically, 63 percent of respondents noted the absence of audio guides and

multilingual information boards, while 55 percent indicated that electronic ticketing and queue-management systems had not been sufficiently introduced. In Bukhara, particularly at the Bahauddin Naqshband complex, long queues have been observed to form during peak season (spring and autumn months), which has a negative impact on pilgrims' overall experience.

In Samarkand, by contrast, the main problem is not related to the transport system as such, but rather to the fact that certain shrines are located far from the city center and that convenient public transport routes to reach them are insufficient. In addition, in both cities, it was noted that outlets for selling local handicraft products are not sufficiently organized near the shrines, indicating limited opportunities to capitalize on additional sources of income.

Infrastructure element	Bukhara (level of availability)	Samarkand (level of availability)
Multilingual information boards	Moderate	Good

Electronic ticketing system	Low	Moderate
Rest facilities	Moderate	Good
Public transport connectivity	Good	Moderate
Handicraft retail outlets	Good	Moderate

Views of Service Providers and the Local Population

According to the interview results, the majority of tourism sector representatives in the two cities (78 percent) emphasized the need for additional financial and regulatory support from the state to develop pilgrimage tourism. At the same time, 65 percent of respondents noted the need to more actively involve the local population and artisans in the tourism value chain and to encourage small business through tax and credit incentives. Some 71 percent of respondents expressed the view that cooperation on tourism between the two city administrations should be strengthened and that joint marketing activities should be conducted.

In addition, conversations with local government representatives revealed that the exchange of tourism statistics and planning information between the two regions is not yet systematic, and that each region often develops its own plans independently, without consultation with the other. This situation may lead to duplication of resources (for example, participating separately in similar international exhibitions) and an uneven distribution of opportunities; regular coordination meetings are therefore recommended.

Level of Pilgrim Satisfaction

According to the survey results, overall satisfaction levels were slightly higher in Samarkand (average of 4.3 points on a 5-point scale) than in Bukhara (average of 3.9 points). In Bukhara, the main reasons for lower ratings were discomforts associated with queues and heat conditions, while in Samarkand, respondents giving lower ratings mainly cited transport issues.

Seasonal Distribution of Visits

An analysis of the seasonal distribution of pilgrim flows in both cities revealed the highest levels of activity during spring (March–May) and autumn (September–November), with these periods accounting for approximately 68 percent of total visits across the two cities combined. During the summer months,

the number of visits decreases considerably due to hot climatic conditions, with this decline being especially pronounced in Bukhara, since the city's climate is hotter and drier than that of Samarkand. During the winter months, visits in both cities drop to a minimum, with mainly local pilgrims and small groups visiting during this period.

Based on this seasonal distribution data, it is possible to somewhat mitigate seasonal fluctuations by organizing special discounted tourism packages during the summer and winter months, cultural events held in indoor venues (such as special exhibitions in museums), and air-conditioned visitor centers adapted for the hot season.

Environmental Sustainability and Heritage Preservation Issues

Environmental and heritage protection issues associated with the growing pilgrim flow were also examined within the scope of this study. According to interview results, certain sacred sites in Bukhara — particularly courtyards with high visitor density — face a risk of soil erosion and deterioration of architectural elements. Some 58 percent of local heritage preservation specialists warned that, over the next 10 years, uncontrolled growth in visitor numbers could cause serious damage to certain unique architectural elements.

To address this problem, it is recommended to introduce a system limiting the number of daily visitors, to isolate particularly fragile architectural elements with dedicated protective barriers, and to strengthen information campaigns familiarizing pilgrims with proper codes of conduct. In Samarkand, by contrast, heritage sites were reported to be in relatively good condition, although the need for regular technical monitoring to ensure long-term sustainability was also emphasized there.

Opportunities for Cooperation with International Donor Organizations

There are opportunities to implement joint projects in

cooperation with UNESCO, the Islamic Development Bank, and other international organizations for the conservation of heritage sites and the development of sustainable tourism infrastructure around them. In recent years, such organizations have actively allocated grants for cultural heritage projects in the Central Asian region; however, Uzbekistan's potential to attract such grants has not yet been fully realized. Representatives of local government authorities and heritage protection institutions emphasized the need for specialized training to improve their skills in preparing grant applications for international funding.

DISCUSSION

The findings show that Bukhara and Samarkand each possess distinct strengths, and that creating a unified "pilgrimage corridor" concept uniting the two cities could simplify pilgrims' movement between them, increase overall tourist flow, and extend the average length of stay. Such an approach could encompass not only the two cities but also additional shrines in the Kashkadarya and Navoi regions, thereby further expanding the regional tourism cluster.

On the issue of infrastructure, particularly in Bukhara, it is recommended to introduce an electronic pre-registration system to resolve the queuing problem, as well as to establish additional entry points at major shrines. In Samarkand, it is important to better connect the city's transport system with the areas where shrines are located, including the establishment of dedicated tourist bus routes.

The introduction of digital technologies — in particular, route planning through mobile applications and the provision of audio-guide services — could significantly improve the pilgrim experience. Through such applications, pilgrims could obtain advance information about queues, plan transport routes, and access information about local handicraft products.

With regard to involving the local population and artisans in the tourism value chain, it is recommended that both cities introduce a "community-based tourism" model. Under this model, local families could offer homestay services to pilgrims and organize master classes in the preparation of traditional dishes, thereby creating additional sources of income while also giving pilgrims the opportunity to become closely acquainted with the local culture.

In order to institutionalize cooperation between the two cities, it is recommended to establish a joint tourism development council, involving representatives of both regional

administrations, tourism specialists, and the private sector. Such a council could make decisions on forming a unified marketing budget, participating jointly in international exhibitions, and developing common quality standards.

Analysis of Pilgrims by Nationality and Region

An analysis of survey results by pilgrims' country of origin revealed significant differences. Pilgrims from Russia and Kazakhstan tend to prefer short-term trips (1–2 days) by car or rail, whereas pilgrims from the Middle East and Southeast Asia typically choose longer trips (4–7 days), traveling by air and covering routes spanning several cities. This difference indicates the need to adapt marketing and service strategies to different market segments.

In particular, an additional survey conducted among pilgrims from Pakistan and India showed that 82 percent of them had traveled without sufficient prior information about the shrines in Uzbekistan available in their home countries, and had only learned about additional sites locally, through guides or fellow pilgrims. This once again confirms the need to strengthen international marketing and advance information dissemination systems.

Pricing Policy and Competitiveness Analysis

A comparison of tourism service prices in the two cities with those of other countries in the region (Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia) revealed that prices in Uzbekistan are considerably competitive. In particular, average hotel prices are 30–40 percent lower than in comparable religious tourism centers in Turkey. This price advantage is an important factor making Uzbekistan an attractive destination, especially for budget-conscious pilgrims; however, this advantage can only secure long-term competitiveness if it is accompanied by high-quality service and adequate infrastructure.

A Separate Development Strategy for Each City

Based on the analysis, differentiated yet mutually complementary development strategies can be proposed for Bukhara and Samarkand. For Bukhara, the primary strategic direction should be to position the city as a "center of Sufism and spirituality," with the heritage of the Naqshbandi order, Sufi philosophy, and traditional handicrafts occupying a central place. To this end, it is recommended to establish a museum-center dedicated to Sufi teachings, to hold an annual international conference on Sufism, and to publish popular-scientific literature on Sufi themes in multiple languages.

For Samarkand, it would be appropriate to promote the city as a “capital of scholarship and enlightenment,” presenting Ulugh Beg’s astronomical heritage, the Registan ensemble, and religious-scholarly centers in an integrated manner. In this regard, it is recommended to hold international scholarly conferences in Samarkand, to organize educational tours for university students, and to create modern interactive museums dedicated to the city’s history.

As a common strategic measure uniting the two cities, it is of great importance to create a “Bukhara–Samarkand pilgrimage corridor” brand, to promote it as a single product at international tourism exhibitions, and to ensure convenient transport connectivity between the two cities via high-speed rail. Such an integrated approach could achieve considerably higher marketing effectiveness than promoting the two cities separately.

Encouraging Youth Entrepreneurship

The extent of youth participation in the pilgrimage tourism value chain in the two cities was separately analyzed. According to survey results, the share of entrepreneurs aged 18–30 in the handicraft sector amounts to only 22 percent, indicating that the younger generation shows relatively less interest in traditional crafts. At the same time, this same age group was found to be considerably more active in digital marketing, tourism content creation, and guide services, with their share reaching up to 45 percent in these sectors.

Taking this trend into account, it is recommended to develop hybrid training programs that teach modern design and digital sales skills in order to attract young people to traditional handicrafts — that is, to combine traditional craft skills with modern entrepreneurial and marketing knowledge. Such an approach would serve not only to preserve traditional handicrafts but also to adapt them to modern economic conditions.

Implementation Roadmap and Institutional Mechanisms

To translate the proposed strategies into practice, it is recommended to develop a clear, phased roadmap. In the first phase (6–12 months), it is necessary to sign a cooperation memorandum between the two regional administrations, establish a joint working group, and conduct a detailed audit of the existing state of infrastructure. In the second phase (1–3 years), it is necessary to implement major infrastructure projects (electronic ticketing systems, transport routes,

navigational signage), as well as to develop a unified marketing brand and begin promoting it in international markets.

In the third phase (3–5 years), the “Bukhara–Samarkand pilgrimage corridor” should be brought to full operational status, convenient transport connectivity should be ensured via high-speed rail, and a unified tourist ticketing system should be introduced between the two cities. To oversee the implementation of each phase, it is advisable to establish a joint monitoring council involving representatives of both regional administrations, the national tourism committee, and the private sector. Such an institutional mechanism would ensure the consistent and effective implementation of the project.

For each stage of the roadmap, it is necessary to identify clear sources of funding and responsible organizations, as well as to develop a system of clear, measurable indicators (such as annual growth in the number of pilgrims and the average length-of-stay indicator) to gauge success. Such a clear and measurable approach facilitates oversight of project implementation and increases the accountability of stakeholders.

Analysis of Air Transport and International Connectivity

A comparative analysis of international and domestic flight capacity for the two cities revealed that Samarkand International Airport handles considerably more direct international flights than Bukhara Airport. Specifically, Samarkand Airport operates regular flights to Russia, Turkey, and the Middle East, whereas international routes from Bukhara Airport remain relatively limited. This difference creates an additional logistical obstacle for pilgrims wishing to travel directly to Bukhara, who often need to reach the city via an additional domestic flight or by road through Tashkent or Samarkand.

To address this problem, it is recommended to negotiate with airlines on launching additional international routes from Bukhara Airport, particularly to the Middle East and South Asia, and to explore the possibility of organizing seasonal charter flights. Such measures could expand direct access to Bukhara and further increase the average length of stay in the city.

Workforce Potential and Educational Cooperation

A comparative analysis of the qualification levels of guides operating in the two cities revealed that the share of guides proficient in foreign languages is higher in Samarkand (approximately 68 percent) than in Bukhara (52 percent). This difference is partly related to the presence of stronger foreign-language education programs at Samarkand State University and other higher education institutions. It is therefore necessary for Bukhara to strengthen similar foreign-language and guide-training programs in order to reduce the gap in workforce potential between the two cities.

Developing joint tourism management and guide-training programs between the higher education institutions of the two cities, along with organizing student exchanges and joint internship programs, could improve the quality of workforce training. Such cooperation would also help establish unified quality standards between the two cities, guaranteeing pilgrims the same high level of service regardless of which city they visit.

Socio-Cultural Impacts and Their Management

The intensification of pilgrimage tourism can have both positive and negative socio-cultural effects on local communities. On the positive side, tourism creates additional motivation to preserve local traditions and handicrafts and to strengthen pride in national and religious heritage among the younger generation. However, if left uncontrolled, an excessive tourist influx may disrupt the religious and spiritual atmosphere of sacred sites, place pressure on the local population's way of life, and lead to an artificial rise in prices.

To prevent these negative effects, it is recommended to limit the number of daily visitors at shrines, to regulate tourism activity during religious ceremonies, and to establish regular dialogue with the local population. Involving local communities in the decision-making process for tourism development ensures that their interests are taken into account and serves long-term social sustainability.

Furthermore, according to results of an additional survey conducted among the local population, 69 percent of respondents regard the development of pilgrimage tourism as a positive phenomenon overall, although 41 percent expressed concern about rising prices and the commercialization of certain local customs. This ambivalence indicates the need for a balanced, phased approach to tourism development that respects the cultural and religious values of local communities.

Another important aspect concerns the preservation of local languages and dialects. As the need to communicate with foreign pilgrims increases, a tendency has been observed among some young members of the local population to prioritize foreign languages, particularly English, raising concerns that this could, over the long term, diminish the significance of local languages and dialects. It is therefore recommended to pursue a balanced approach, combining the teaching of foreign languages with dedicated programs to preserve local language and cultural heritage.

Marketing and Branding Strategy

An analysis of the branding strategy of the two cities in the international market revealed that Bukhara and Samarkand are currently promoted mostly separately and independently of one another. At official tourism portals and international exhibitions, the two cities are often presented through separate stands or separate sections, which fails to fully showcase their combined potential as a unified "Great Silk Road pilgrimage center." In interviews conducted with international tourism marketing specialists, 73 percent of respondents noted that a unified presentation under a single strong brand generates considerably greater attention and trust among international audiences than the promotion of separate cities.

An analysis of marketing channels showed that the two cities are currently promoted mainly through traditional means — tourism exhibitions, printed brochures, and word-of-mouth dissemination through tour operators — while digital marketing and targeted advertising on social media are used relatively little. In international practice, successful religious tourism centers (such as Jerusalem and the Vatican) effectively convey their official narrative through professional video content, virtual tours, and collaborations with celebrities — an approach that could also be applied in Uzbekistan.

To improve the branding strategy, it is recommended to develop an integrated marketing campaign under a unified slogan such as "Bukhara and Samarkand — the Path of Spirituality and Scholarship," and to promote it through professional-level video reports, virtual 360-degree tours, and collaboration with popular travel bloggers on social media. Such a comprehensive approach could significantly increase the visibility of the two cities on the international tourism map.

Security and Order-Related Issues

Security and order-related issues at sacred sites in the two

cities were also examined within the scope of this study. In locations where large crowds gather during peak season, particularly at the Bahauddin Naqshband complex, an insufficient number of security personnel and a lack of specialized training in crowd management were identified as problems. In Samarkand, security oversight is relatively well organized in open spaces such as Registan Square; however, it was observed that emergency exit routes within enclosed indoor spaces (such as inside mausoleums) are not clearly marked.

In this regard, it is recommended that both cities provide security personnel with specialized training in crowd management and emergency response, and install clear and visible emergency exit signage at sacred sites. In addition, expanding video surveillance systems would not only enhance security but also make it possible to monitor pilgrim flows in real time and manage queues more effectively.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, regional cooperation and infrastructure investment constitute the key to effectively utilizing the pilgrimage tourism potential of Bukhara and Samarkand. It is recommended that the administrations of the two cities develop a unified tourism marketing strategy, introduce a common tourist ticketing and route system, and implement joint projects to improve transport connectivity.

In the future, it would be appropriate to extend this study to also encompass the cities of Khiva and Termez, and to develop a strategic document for forming a unified national pilgrimage tourism cluster. Such an approach would enable Uzbekistan to become a leading country in Central Asia for pilgrimage tourism in the near future.

As a limitation of this study, it should be noted that the survey sample was relatively limited (180 pilgrims); future studies should expand the sample size in order to draw statistically more robust conclusions.

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