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Perspectives on the Improvement of Uzbekistan as a Destination for Multi-Confessional Self-Organised Pilgrims

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By accenting the tourism industry as one of the most valuable sectors for prosperity and appreciating its potential in new social-economic reforms, the administration of the Republic of Uzbekistan has been making visible steps for its development. Particularly religious tourism and pilgrimage are noted as offering opportunities for modernisation in a global world. Carrying a major geographical role in the connection of main trade routes between East and West, the country became the crossroad of civilisation and religious diffusions. Consequently, with new religious tourism and pilgrimage flows: following the earliest dominating beliefs of Zoroastrianism, and its New Age followers; being the historical homeland of Bukharian Jews; being attractive to representatives of Mahayana Buddhism from the East Asian continent and; containing shrines primarily from the Islamic cultural renaissance, could all make it an attractive destination.

The distances between these destinations requires an input of investment in infrastructure to provide easy access by air and land. A commitment and elaboration of food preferences, and arrangement of suitable accommodation options along with media advertisement abroad, would create diversity of supply and competitive advantages in global tourism market.

Key Words: Destination, clustering, pilgrimage, religious tourism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Buddhism, Islam, Silk Road, multi-confessional

Introduction

From the distant past, people have been travelling for different purposes, such as pilgrimage, commerce, education, studying foreign countries, visiting relatives etc.. In the twentieth century this evolved into a mass phenomenon, due to social and economic development, and advancement of transportation and information communication, a growth which has continued into the twenty-first century. According to the data of the World Tourism Organisation, international tourist arrivals reached to 25 million in 1950, 278 million in 1980, after two more decades it reached 674 million and in 2017 reached a total of 1,326 billion (World Tourism Organisation, 2018).

Initiating new reforms for constructive changes in the tourism industry, the new administration in Uzbekistan created positions in its regional branches, underlining the importance of tourism for sustainable economic growth. Taking into consideration other competitive destinations and their easy access, new regulation have been developed to relax visa procedures that were

previously required by every traveller. Traditionally, visitors were required to make an application months before departure, visiting the closest consulate of Uzbekistan. In 2018 only 9 countries had visa-free permissions for the entrance to Uzbekistan, however, by February 2019, this had been extended to 76 countries. Relatively high number of visitors come from countries with high Muslim populations, such as Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Russia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Turkey and this is expected to increase in a visa-free regime. The majority of these countries are expected to send potential travellers to Uzbekistan for both 'religious tourism' and 'pilgrimage' (Navruz-Zoda & Navruz-Zoda, 2016).

The State Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan for Tourism Development reported results for 2018, the highlight of which, is the number of international visitors reaching 5 million, while there were 795 active tour operating companies and 886 hotels in the country (State Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan for Tourism Development, 2019).

Figure 1 : Map of Uzbekistan



http://www.200stran.ru/maps_group2_item989.html

Multi-confessional destinations in Uzbekistan

Due to the remoteness of the great Parthian Civilisation (which primarily comprised ancient Iran) and its widely spread borders across the deserts of Asia, it is difficult to definitively put dates on the origins of Zoroastrianism. However, it is commonly accepted that the influence of its founder Zarathushtra (also known as Zoroaster, Zarathustra, Spitama or Ashu Zarathushtra) date from at least the early 6th and 7th centuries BC. Proclaiming strong dualistic ideas (good and evil) it easily penetrated into the daily life and primordial activities of nomadic people in Central Asia. Archaeologists suggest that Zarathushtra travelled via the Kyzylkum deserts and Ustyurtplateau (currently western parts of Uzbekistan - see map), in a search of visions which formed the bases of his teachings. It is a

wonder that despite being destroyed by dozens of invasions in subsequent centuries, which resulted in new dictated cultures, the primitive lifestyle and architecture remained and clearly connects through the centuries. As an example, the so called Dakhma or 'Chylpik-Tower of Silence', a clay-based tower dated from 1st BC - 1st century AD still survives in its original form. This was used for the traditional burial processes of the faithful and lies in a territory of 'Ellikkala', the golden Ring of the Horezm region; this mysterious structure still raises the interests of scientist from around the world. In particular it is of interest to 'New Movement' members and followers of the Parsi faith (followers of Zoroastrianism in India and Pakistan) from South Asia, who like to follow the route of the very first missionaries more than two and half millennia ago. While numbers of Zoroastrians in modern Uzbekistan are quite small, similarities in

linguistic roots and the importance of holy elements such as water, fire and earth in many traditions of modern Uzbekistani people unconsciously link this ancient religion to daily life.

Known as a Far East settlement area for old Jewish diaspora on the Euroasian continent, the Bukhara Jews, according to historians reached the territory of Central Asia at the beginning of 16 hundreds. The Sefardi Jews with their origins in Persia were named 'Bukharian' because of their primary settlement in the Uzbeki city of Bukhara. The existence of a five century old Synagogue Roll along with a thousand year old Torah book are significant for the small local community of Jews who are left after the extensive emmigration which started in the beginning of the 20th Century. As a result of official 'offered' help from the Soviet Authorities, they emigrated and formed quite strong settlements in the USA, Israel, Germany, Austria and Canada. Typical for central Asians, they still celebrate their gastronomical preferences and maintain tadjik-hebrew communication by using the Cyrillic alphabet which they carried into their new settled cultures. These historical and genetic connections help to support a very loyal but small community of representatives in so called 'Jewish-quarters' which have ecome highlights of Bukhara and Samarkand for all visitors.

The growth of Islam began in the early seventh century and its strong scientific ideologies arrived in this region only one hundred and fifty years later, to influence society and academic education. As the one of the religious doctrines in Islam, Sufism strives for perfection. Taking into consideration the intensive connection of cultures through trade and communication in the Middle Ages, the territory of Central Asia became a crossroads of civilisation. Considered as one of the primarily philosophies in the region, the Tasavvuf (mysticism) school developed and its material and non-material heritage began in the territory of current Uzbekistan, where respect for educational ideas has continuously formed the basis for inter-cultural and inter-religious relationships. In particular, Bukhara, which is known as the noble city, is important in this regard as it has been the homeland of many great thinkers, including seven holy Sufi saints. The followers and members of Tariqats like Nakshbandiya, Kadiriya, Khajagan and others travel there for the 'Seven Sufi Saints of Noble Bukhara (Navruz-Zoda, Ibragimov, & Rakhmanov, 2017).

The Sultan of Hadith world Imam Muhammad Ismail al-Bukhara's efforts are widely researched around the

Muslim world. Even though, his shrine almost disappeared after an extended period of religion being banned, reasonable reconstruction works have been undertaken in the last 25 years. This holy place in the outskirts of Samarkand interests more and more pilgrims from around the globe and has become a main religious Centre in Central Asia. Another great scholar, a member of the Golden Islamic Age and another collector of Hadith, Al Khakim at-Termizi, was born and ended his life in the southern part of Uzbekistan in Termiz.

Paradoxically, Termez was also a translator of Mahayanna Buddhism from India to China and the Far East, and thus, the southern part of the country formed a new centre for building monasteries and churches. Many remains (cave-ground monuments) survive in the city of Termez, or Tarmita, which is a former city of the Kushan Empire(1st-3rd Century AD); its rich archaeological findings are considered as a great contribution of Mahayan Buddhist culture. One of the monastic towns Fayaz-Tepe, was explored by archaeologist more than half a century ago, and is considered as a site of golden heritage of Buddhism in the North Bactrian region.

Models of shaping flow of pilgrims

It is important to note that many tourists planning to visit Uzbekistan for pilgrimage, currently work through receptive tour operators. It is quite possible however, that rapid growth in the level of openness of Uzbekistan (World Tourism Organisation 2018a), will lead to a sharp increase in the number of self-organised pilgrims from leading countries.

There are several models / factors currently shaping the flow of pilgrims, such as: 1) initiating tour operator, 2) receptive tour operator, 3) reservation and booking systems, 4) national and local tourism portals models (Ibragimov, 2017). Pilgrims, facilitated by initiative and receptive tour operators are considered as organised pilgrims, and those who utilise reservation or national and local tourism portals, can be considered as self-organised pilgrims (Navruz-zoda B.N. (2017).

1.Model of 'Initiating Tour Operator'.

In this instance, the pilgrimage is organised by the initiating tour operator, who is based in the home-place of the potential pilgrim, with the receptive tour operator based in the place where the pilgrimage occurs. The 'trip' is sold as a tour package for a single price that includes services of hotel, transport, guide,

restaurant and others. From the second half of 19th century till the end of 20th, namely in the period of less-developed internet technologies and the absence of web sites of tour operators, in order to buy touristic packages, consumers had to approach a travel agency. Today this process can be undertaken without intermediaries. This means that customers can buy tour packages using online channels to connect with initiating tour operators.

2. Model of ‘Receptive tour operator’.

In this instance, the pilgrimage is organised fully or partly at a distance by the receptive tour operator who is based in the receptive country, and the ‘package’ includes at least two services such as hotel and transportation, which are sold as a tour package with a single price. This model assumed the characteristics of ‘mass’ tourism in the 21st century. Potential pilgrims can now buy tour packages directly via the selling channels (web-sites) of receptive tour operators without reference to tour operator or tour agencies in their homeland.

3. Model of ‘Reservation and booking systems’.

In the second half of the 20th century, certain group of people (tour operators, touristic agencies, of flight and train ticket offices) utilised Global Reservation Systems together with private electronic systems for purchasing tickets for different modes of transport and for booking hotel rooms. These are useable by everyone today and the process has become fully popularised via the use of web-sites. More recently, these sites have begun to use portable interfaces and mobile apps which also helps to enlarge the number of pilgrims.

Modern pilgrims are organising their travels independently, namely booking their flights and train tickets, hotels, restaurants and guide services via global sites (such as, booking.com, trivago.com, needguide.ru) or local reservation systems, namely through the private web-sites of touristic service organisations (eticket.uzrailway.uz).

4. Model of ‘Touristic portal’.

This model involves the concept of managing a pilgrimage region as a destination. This shapes tourist flow through pilgrimage portals organised by national, regional and local marketing management organisations. It differs from other types of management and applies innovative methods,

leveraging local resources to attract pilgrims. While the main activity for such agencies is undertaken at a national level, local tourism entrepreneurs participate in all aspects of the value-added chain. This means that countries with developed and developing pilgrimage tourism can create touristic portals at national, regional and local levels where the opportunity will be given to potential pilgrims to organise independent travels.

Three spatial elements of tourism

Leiper (1990) used a geographical approach to describe the tourism system and created a model of ‘Tourist attraction systems’ composed of tourist generating regions, tourist destinations and the transit region. This model defines the tourism system as an amalgam of tourist, industry and geographical elements. Prosser (1998) further developed the model and looked at it as a tourism area, a tourist market, and a set of advertising activity, transport and communications systems. Kaspar (1992) defines ‘tourism’ as an open system that is influenced by political, economic, social, technological and environmental factors.

As a result of a BSU research group project, a ‘*Three Spatial System Model of Tourism*’ (Ibragimov, 2017b) was developed, consisting of the spaces:

- 1) generating tourists;
- 2) information and
- 3) travel (destination).

This scientific novelty provides a systems perspective which can be used for scientific education process in relation to tourism. It is desirable to determine the perspectives of organisation teaching and learning material based on the Three-spatial paradigm of tourism system. Furthermore, it is necessary to adopt methodological tools for the teaching and learning processes of hospitality sciences for the improvement of methodological tools in the process of teaching and learning in the hospitality sciences for potential political decision makers and stakeholders in the Uzbekistan tourism system.

The tourism system consists of input and output units and is influenced by social, economic, political, technological, legal and environmental factors. There are material, human, financial, and information resources available in this system. Inputs of the tourism supply system are a set of tangible and intangible resources that can be used to meet the financial resources and travel needs of a potential

traveller; at the output of the system there are providers of tours, impressions of travellers, and a set of (positive) emotions arising from products and services used throughout the journey. The main function of the tourism supply system is to attract potential tourists, satisfy their travel needs and bring them back to their permanent place of residence with positive emotions.

To understand these processes, a complex systems approach is required to analyse the geographical framework of the internal tourism infrastructure. The tourism industry is a major network of a country's economy designed to meet travel needs and is divided into international, national, and domestic tourism categories. The category 'internal tourism' includes international incoming and domestic visitor flows. Thus, the main condition for the sustainable development of tourism in a country / region, is to systematically address the problem of promoting and serving tourism, as well as understanding the ways in which the processes occurs.

The internal tourism supply system is an open system that consists of spaces, of generating tourists, of information and travel destinations, and is a unification of all public and private organisations involved in satisfying the needs of international and domestic visitors in all three spaces (Ibragimov, 2017b).

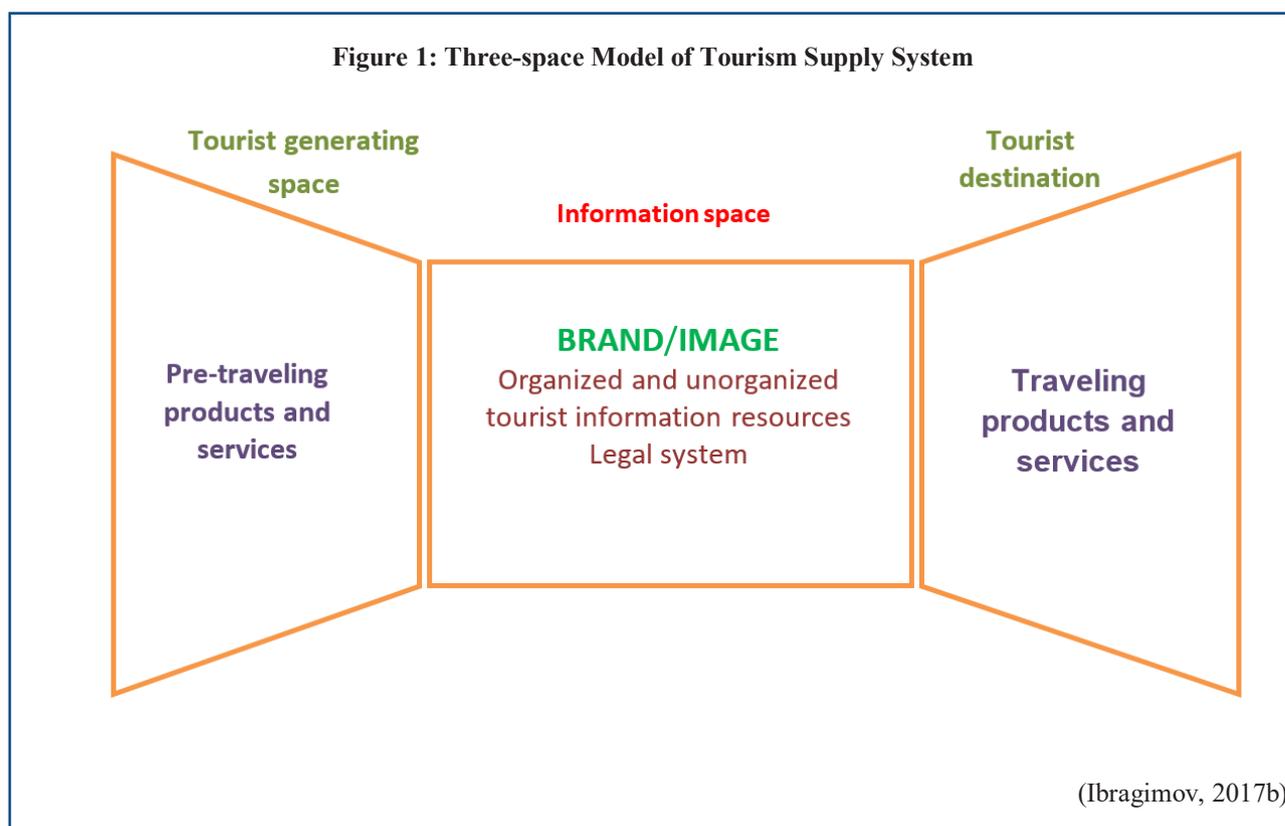
The internal tourism supply system is based on the interactions that occur between consumers and producers in 1) tourist generating, 2) information and 3) destination spaces (see Figure 1).

1. Tourist generating space - which includes the following commodities and services:

- Tourism agents, like tour operators, travel agents and destination management companies;
- Travel services and product manufacturers, like transport companies; visa issuing authorities; travel related publishers; producers of cameras, luggage and other services used during the travel but bought before travel.

2. Information space – this is the combination of information and marketing tools that attract tourists and travellers:

- The forms of information technology, which are created for satisfaction of organised and unorganised visitors, for example: information and communication technologies; tourist agencies; channels of commercialisation for tourist packages; booking systems for transport, hotel, catering etc; and geo information systems;



- A set of marketing strategies that promote a country's attractiveness and form a positive image. For example branding, image forming, advertising, mass media, national tourism portal etc.;
- A set of resources that informs about the current laws of the state for example communication tools for foreign language versions of required documents (Lex.uz).

3. Destination - all organisations that satisfy tourists are involved in a range of products and services, which are grouped as follows:

- Cultural and natural resources (attractions);
- Government and non-government organisations (NGOs) for the development, regulation and co-operation of tourism;
- Travel agents (receptive tour operators);
- Travel service providers (transport companies, accommodation institutions, catering organisations, museums and excursions, other products or services used during travel).

Sustainable internal tourism development is based on establishing partnerships with the emerging markets, mutually beneficial economic relationships between the receptive and initiating tour operators, and secondly, the availability of reservation systems for tourists, incorporating service organisations into the geo-information systems database and other information technology-based marketing tools. The most important prerequisite for the sustainable development of tourism at the national level in the modern digital age is the formation and systemic improvement of information services in the tourism supply system.

Returning to the concept of successful multi-confessional tourism development, there is a recognised link between the established cooperation of emerging markets, receptive and initiating tour agents. There must be a mutually beneficial economic relationships. Secondly, the availability of booking systems fit to the behavioural model of self-organised pilgrims is vital, and this must incorporate service providers into the geo-information systems and other marketing-based tools. This means, there is a need to tackle the digital divide concept (Minghetti & Buhalis, 2010) between the tourist generating space and the destination - the larger the difference, the more difficult it is to position a destination in the tourist market.

Specific features of Pilgrimage tourism

'Pilgrimage tourism' is travelling of different representatives of religion to holy places for praying purposes (Navruz-Zoda & Navruz-Zoda, 2018) This type of tourism, has following characteristics:

1. Based on religious belief.

Pilgrimage tourism can be classified by different religions. This characteristic reflects the travel of Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Hinduists and other religious adherents to religious centres.

2. Journey for worshipping purpose.

Pilgrimage and religious tourism differ from educational or other forms of tourism. Pilgrims are interested in religious events and worshipping in holy places, religious travellers are interested more in visiting and learning about religious sites, museums, and exhibitions. These latter travellers may have religious beliefs or not; pilgrims however, are usually people with certain religious beliefs.

3. Travel of pilgrims to certain holy places.

The main pilgrimage places for Christians are Jerusalem and the Vatican, Muslims go to Makkah and Madinah for Hajj, the main pilgrimage places of Buddhists are in India and Nepal, whereas people interested in Sufism go to places where founders of ways of spiritual perfections were born and visit locations with their mausoleums.

4. Pilgrimage at certain times.

Based upon certain religious characteristics, pilgrims go on pilgrimage to holy places in certain months, on the birthday of a famous figure, or date of a religious event or other important dates; for example, Muslims conduct Hajj on Eid al-Adha.

5. Touristic services for religious persons.

Pilgrims usually do not require services with full comfort. It is enough for them to have place for sleeping. When eating they have special needs that should be noted while organising the tour. For Islamic pilgrims it is important to serve them according to gender. On pricing pilgrimage services, it is better to pay attention to covering expenses instead of making profit. While advertising pilgrimage tourism it is essential to note the logic and accuracy of text, and adherence to the corresponding religious code.

6. Particular pilgrimage tourism infrastructure.

Journeys are organised according to the types of pilgrims. For organised groups planned special pilgrimage programs can be assigned a guide, while self-organised pilgrims undertake a pilgrimage themselves. On choosing the means of transportation, it is significant to take into account the distance of the place and desires and expectations of pilgrims. In some situations travels are carried out afoot or with motor free vehicles. Infrastructure organisations specialised in pilgrimage tourism should pay attention to the quality of service they provide. Tourism organisations should organise measures for supporting pilgrims.

7. Organisational and management features of pilgrimage tourism.

Methods of management form a main factor in increasing the flow of pilgrims and the stability of the product. The concept of regional marketing or the 'destination' concept of management is widely used in foreign experience pilgrimage tourism. A main feature of this concept is creating local pilgrimage supply systems and managing this in a market-oriented manner. This means that based on the opportunities offered by a pilgrimage region, a 'pilgrimage complex' is shaped with the purpose of attracting pilgrims to this specially formulated complex system.

Table 1 : Comparative analysis of tendency of consuming services by organised and self-organised pilgrims (Case of Bukhara, Uzbekistan)

Types of service	Predisposition to usage (high, low, no)		Is service implemented?
	<i>Organised pilgrims</i>	<i>Independent pilgrims</i>	
Traditional guide service	High	Low	Yes
Innovative guide service (audio guide)	Low	High	No
Halal/ kosher Restaurant service	High	Low	Yes
Halal/ kosher Fast food service	Low	High	Partly
Public transportation service	No	High	Yes
Renting a car	No	High	No
Renting a bike or other ecological transportations	Low	High	Partly
Travelling by a private car	No	High	Yes
Multi-seat transportation (shuttle bus) service	High	No	Yes
Camping service	Low	High	No
Parking	No	High	Partly
Petrol stations service	No	High	Yes
Services of giant chain hotels	High	Low	Partly
Services of small hotels	Low	High	Yes
Hostel service	No	High	Partly
Services of renting an apartment	No	High	No
Services of super and minimarkets	Low	High	Yes
Payment via international cards	Low	High	Partly
ATM services	Low	High	Partly
Tour operator services	High	No	Yes
Services of reservation system	No	High	Yes
Services of geo-information system	No	High	No
Visitor information services	Low	High	No
E-kiosk services	Low	High	No
Wi-Fi service	Low	High	No
Tourist police service	Low	High	Yes

Comparative analysis of organised and self-organised pilgrims

Resulting from the increasing level of international openness of Uzbekistan it is likely that a major segment of pilgrims - independent travellers - will increase. To increase the attractiveness of Uzbekistan for this segment it is important to identify the distinctive features, and the favoured goods and services of this cohort.

Based on our investigations, self-organised pilgrims have the following characteristics:

- pilgrims, acquainted with each other for a long time, like to travel in small groups;
- pilgrims, travel primarily by plane, or in their own car, according to the distance of the pilgrimage, they usually like to rent a car;
- people, tend to reserve or book the main services (such as hotels, transport, tickets for the entrance to pilgrimage places) on-line ;
- people, tend to choose countries with visa-free regimes or where countries require a visa they chose locations that have opportunity of getting e-visas;
- people, often travel without an obvious travel plan, and are ready to change their tour direction based on local / current conditions;
- pilgrims, are socially active and make a decisions depending on social networks;
- pilgrims will travel for the purpose of participating in faith activities on the dates of special religious events (religious ceremonies, birthday of historical figure, special dates and others).

Self-organised pilgrims, mostly pilgrims without an obvious travel plan, not willing to use tour operator services, prefer to travel on the dates of special religious events (religious ceremonies, birthday of historical figure, special dates and others) and mostly like to rent a car, eat fast food, rest in cafes or bars near to pilgrimage localities, use camping services, hotels, hostels or guest houses.

For the purpose of identifying the difference between pilgrims buying tour packages and those who avoid the services of tour operators, and linking this to the degree of engagement with consumer services in the Bukhara tourist area, we have developed a comparative analysis of these segments (Results of the analysis are provided in Table 1).

How Uzbekistan can develop pilgrimage tourism?

In our opinion, pilgrimage tourism in Uzbekistan can be developed in the following ways:

Organised Pilgrimage perspective

Exploring demand-led pilgrimage tourism.

The Uzbeki tourism industry needs to consider implementing measures to determine the main purposes of pilgrimage tourism, in order to consider: the most appropriate methods of marketing; the segmentation of pilgrims depending on geographic, demographic, behavioral, psychological and other characteristics; studying needs of segmented groups of pilgrims.

Developing infrastructure of pilgrimage tourism.

The uniqueness of the tourism product lies in its complexity. Tourists use hotel, restaurant, transportation and guide services while travelling. The more comfort and/or suitability there is in the infrastructure for pilgrims, the more visitors will flow to the country. The number of hotels in Uzbekistan is increasing year-by-year. However, most of them have adopted European styles, which are not necessarily for the pilgrims. In our opinion, it would be better to have hotels in two parts: an outer courtyard (for men) and an inner courtyard (for women). Moreover, in our country there are many restaurants and cafes, but there are a few restaurants that serve halal foods for pilgrims.

Creating attractive sacred place in the country.

Resulting from the availability of holy pilgrimage possibilities, there is opportunity to create many pilgrimage sites and itineraries. As examples:

- ‘Homeland of Imam Al-Bukhary’ (Memorial complex of Al-Bukhary in Samarkand and places of worship in Bukhara),
- ‘Seven Saints of Bukhara’ (Complex of Hazrat Abdukholik Gijduvany in Gijduvan district, Tomb of Orif Revgary in Shafirkan district, Complex of Makhmud Anjeer Revgary in Vabkent district, Tomb of Khuja Ali Romitany and complex of Khuja Mukhammad Boboi Samosy in Ramitan district, Tomb of Mir Said Kulol and complex of Hazrat Bakhouddin Nakshband in Kagan district);
- Pilgrimage based on ‘Holy Bukhara’ (complexes of Khuja Ismat, Chor-bakr, Kalon Mosque, Mosque of Piri Dastgir) and etc.

Cataloguing the 'Pilgrimage places of Uzbekistan'.

In undertaking this catalog, it is essential to create a dossier of colourful photos of holy places and offer precise explanations about them. Furthermore, advertising these pilgrimage places in foreign countries, will provide opportunities to develop inbound pilgrimage tourism.

Implementation of reasonable pricing strategies pilgrimage tourism services.

In the process of pricing these services, it is better to consider an economic model basing on 'expenditure plus modest profit' instead of basing the system on profit and competition. Because pilgrims visit holy places with sincerely good intentions, serving them in an unbiased way is thankful work. If we increase prices of the services to achieve more profit, the number of pilgrims may decrease.

Organising travel agencies specialising in pilgrimage tourism.

It is obvious that the tour companies in our country are mostly specialised in cultural and city tourism. They do not take the peculiarities of pilgrimage tourism into consideration. Pilgrimage tourism will grow significantly if we set up specialist tourism-oriented marketing services in our country.

Stabilisation of inbound pilgrimage tourism.

For the enhancement of foreign pilgrim flow, it is important to apply concepts of destination marketing and destination management to religious tourism. The idea is to professionalise the marketing and management of pilgrimage places. This approach reflects on the overall marketing of tourism services as a strategically commercial unit and nowadays it is widely used in the leading tourist countries.

Self-organised pilgrimage perspective

As a result of our comparative analysis of the consuming tendencies of organised and self-organised pilgrims and our examination of the types of implemented services in Bukhara pilgrimage places, we have come to clear conclusions on increasing the attractiveness of Uzbekistan for self-organised pilgrims. Arising from our deliberations we make the following suggestions and recommendations:

It is important to implement national systems that offer an opportunity for widespread use of online reservation or purchasing systems covering the main services, such as hotels, restaurants, air and train tickets.

Unlike organised pilgrims, self-organised pilgrims like to eat at public catering establishments that serve suitable meals based on the requirements of kosher or halal standards. It is important that such offerings are available close to sacred sites, thus, it is recommended to implement such kinds of places (ranging from fast food, to pilgrim menus and even fine dining).

Taking into consideration the travel of pilgrims by private or rented vehicles, it is important to implement parking management plans and also to provide camping zones near to pilgrimage places.

With the sharp increase in the number of pilgrims who like to use inexpensive accommodation services, there will be demand for hostels and rental houses. A major growth in these sectors is expected in the near future, and there will be need for increasing the offering of such institutions.

The growth in need for tourism information, information kiosks, road signage, geo-location systems and tourist police services are also expected.

It is important to implement the acceptance of international payment cards, in addition to offering widespread use of cash machines and terminals in the more intensive tourist locations.

Fulfilling the measures outlined above and tackling the aforementioned conditions, the country's attractiveness would be ensured for independent pilgrims coming from the 76 visa-free countries, thus achieving the tourism and travel competitiveness of Uzbekistan.

Conclusion

In order to develop multi-confessional self-organised tourism, we make a number of suggestions. Firstly, the index of openness directly links with the attractiveness of Uzbekistan as a multi-confessional destination for self-organised pilgrims. For this group, a full, reliable and secure supply of digital infrastructure is considered as the preliminary factor of tourist flow - both the online availability of information and services, and the availability of appropriate connectivity throughout the visit. Thus, the provision of resources / tools for pilgrimage is needed to satisfy different religious travellers before and during the trip. Secondly, the most successful way of improvement is meeting the needs of the aforementioned religious groups. The tourism industry needs to be aware of their geographical locations, their travel characteristics as well as the period of their holidays / festivals and requirements in terms of comfort etc. In response, the industry must meet their needs and offer suitable and appropriate services in terms of food preferences and other requirements according to segmentation;

A further consideration is the need for easy accessibility between the offered destinations, this will assist in tackling regionality, working to ease competition between sites but also, the bundling of sites which are close to each other will offer options for more extended the stays. The operation of regional growth strategies and access between destinations will increase the attractiveness of the country itself, and hopefully result in further investment in new opportunities.

The appearance of new international destinations such as Uzbekistan, offering travel opportunities with viable air and land access will increase the competitiveness of the country. The increased variety of international travel opportunities should improve levels of second (or third etc.) time repeat visits.

Having established the core product, it would be important to set up infrastructure and combined services for MICE tourism, business forums as well as sport and cultural events to provide options which would shorten the off season;

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