

PROGRESS OF THE TOURISM INDUSTRY IN KARAKALPAKSTAN

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Summary: Tourism plays an increasingly important role in the economic and social development of Uzbekistan, particularly in the Republic of Karakalpakstan, a region rich in cultural heritage, natural beauty, and ecological diversity. This paper examines the development of the tourism industry in Karakalpakstan, exploring its historical background, current infrastructure, potential tourism destinations, and government strategies to enhance the sector. The research highlights the significance of ecotourism, cultural tourism, and scientific tourism in the context of the Aral Sea crisis and sustainable regional development. Based on the analysis of official documents, strategic programs, and international reports, the article identifies key challenges and proposes recommendations for improving tourism competitiveness and integration into global travel networks.

Keywords: tourism development, Karakalpakstan, Aral Sea, ecotourism, cultural heritage, Uzbekistan, sustainable development, investment, regional economy.

Tourism is recognized as one of the most rapidly expanding and dynamic sectors within the global economy. According to the World Tourism Organization (2023), the tourism sector accounts for approximately 10% of global GDP and provides employment for around one in every ten people worldwide. For developing nations such as Uzbekistan, tourism serves as a key strategic industry that supports economic diversification, generates employment opportunities, and fosters cultural interaction.

The Republic of Karakalpakstan, located in the northwest of Uzbekistan, possesses vast potential for tourism development. The region combines unique historical monuments, ecological sites, and ethnographic diversity. However, for many years, tourism in Karakalpakstan remained underdeveloped due to limited infrastructure, low investment, and the ecological disaster of the Aral Sea. In recent years, the Government of Uzbekistan has prioritized tourism development as part of the national strategy for regional growth, environmental rehabilitation, and cultural revival.

The first tourism activities in Karakalpakstan began in the 1960s when Soviet scientists and travelers visited the Aral Sea and the surrounding desert areas for research and recreation. The city of Muynak was a famous fishing port and resort area during the Soviet period. After the Aral Sea began drying up in the 1970s–1980s, the region faced ecological and economic challenges, leading to a sharp decline in tourism.

However, the post-independence period (after 1991) brought renewed attention to Karakalpakstan's cultural and natural potential. The establishment of the «Savitsky State Art Museum» in Nukus, often called the “Louvre of the Steppe,” became a major attraction for international visitors and art enthusiasts. The museum houses over 90,000 exhibits, including the world's second-largest collection of Russian avant-garde art and unique samples of Karakalpak folk culture (Savitsky Museum Report, 2023).

The «Tourism Development Strategy of Uzbekistan for 2022–2026» includes special measures to develop tourism in Karakalpakstan. The main priorities include:

1. Development of «ecotourism» in the Aral Sea region;
2. Promotion of «ethno-cultural tourism» related to Karakalpak traditions;
3. Support for «scientific tourism» and environmental research;
4. Improvement of transport and hospitality infrastructure.

According to the «State Committee for Tourism of Uzbekistan (2024)», the number of

tourists visiting Karakalpakstan increased from 50,000 in 2016 to more than 300,000 in 2023, including around 40,000 foreign tourists. The main tourist routes include Nukus, Muynak, Mizdakhhan Necropolis, Gaur Kala fortress, the Ustyurt Plateau, and the dried bottom of the Aral Sea.

Significant investments have been made in the construction of new hotels, guest houses, eco-camps, and road infrastructure. In Muynak, the “Aral Sea Eco-Camping” project and the annual «Rally Muynak» off-road competition have become symbols of new tourism life in the region. Moreover, Karakalpakstan is increasingly being promoted as part of Uzbekistan’s “Eco and Adventure Tourism Zone.”

Ecotourism has become a major component of Karakalpakstan’s regional strategy. The «UNDP Aral Sea Programme (2022)» supports local communities in developing eco-friendly tourism services that generate income while preserving natural ecosystems. Visitors are attracted by the dramatic landscapes of the dried Aral seabed, the Ustyurt Plateau, and the unique flora and fauna of the desert.

Sustainable tourism projects, such as “Eco Aral,” “Visit Karakalpakstan,” and “Tourism for Climate Action,” encourage tourists to participate in tree planting, wildlife observation, and environmental education. These initiatives help to create an image of Karakalpakstan not only as a region of ecological tragedy but also as a center of ecological revival.

Karakalpak culture is one of the oldest in Central Asia. Folk art, traditional clothing, jewelry, yurts, and epic poetry (dastans) attract researchers and travelers. The «Republican Museum of Karakalpak Culture», local crafts centers in Chimbay and Ellikkala, and the «Festival of Karakalpak Art and Folklore» have become popular among tourists.

Cultural routes are being developed in cooperation with UNESCO to include Karakalpak historical monuments in the «World Heritage Tentative List». For instance, Mizdakhhan Necropolis, a sacred site near Khodjeili, is one of the oldest necropolises in Central Asia, dating back to the 4th century BCE. Its restoration and promotion as a tourist destination are supported by UNESCO and the Ministry of Culture of Uzbekistan.

Despite recent progress, several challenges hinder the full realization of Karakalpakstan’s tourism potential:

- * Limited air and rail connections with international markets;
- * Insufficient service quality and trained personnel in the hospitality sector;
- * Need for more digital marketing and branding;
- * Environmental degradation and limited water resources in certain areas.

However, the government and international partners (World Bank, UNDP, and ADB) have launched several programs aimed at overcoming these barriers. The «Aral Sea Region – Zone of Environmental Innovations and Technologies» initiative (2021) aims to turn Karakalpakstan into a hub of eco-innovation and sustainable tourism, combining environmental protection with economic growth.

The development of tourism in Karakalpakstan represents both a challenge and an opportunity for Uzbekistan’s sustainable future. The combination of natural landscapes, cultural richness, and historical heritage gives the region a unique advantage in attracting both domestic and foreign visitors. By improving infrastructure, investing in human capital, and promoting ecotourism and cultural heritage, Karakalpakstan can become a leading destination in Central Asia.

Tourism here is not only an economic sector but also a mechanism for preserving identity, supporting local communities, and transforming the image of the Aral Sea region into one of hope and renewal.

Резюме: В статье рассматриваются вопросы развития туризма в Республике Каракалпакстан — регионе с уникальным культурным наследием и природным потенциалом. Проанализированы современные тенденции, инфраструктура и

приоритетные направления, включая экотуризм, культурный и научный туризм. Особое внимание уделено роли туризма в устойчивом развитии региона Приаралья и восстановлении экологического баланса. Выявлены основные проблемы (недостаток инфраструктуры, кадров, маркетинга) и предложены пути их решения. Сделан вывод, что Каракалпакстан способен стать центром экологического и культурного туризма в Центральной Азии.

Ключевые слова: туризм, Каракалпакстан, Узбекистан, Приаралье, экотуризм, культурное наследие, устойчивое развитие, инвестиции, региональная экономика.

Rezyume: Maqolada Qoraqalpog‘iston Respublikasida turizm sohasining rivojlanishi, uning madaniy, tabiiy va iqtisodiy salohiyati tahlil qilinadi. Asosiy e’tibor ekoturizm, madaniy va ilmiy turizm yo‘nalishlariga qaratilgan. Aralbo‘yi mintaqasining barqaror rivojlanishida turizmning o‘rni, infratuzilma va kadrlar tayyorlash muammolari hamda ularni hal etish yo‘llari ko‘rib chiqiladi. Mualliflar Qoraqalpog‘istonni Markaziy Osiyoda ekologik va madaniy turizm markaziga aylantirish istiqbollarini yoritadilar.

Kalit so‘zlar: turizm, Qoraqalpog‘iston, O‘zbekiston, Aralbo‘yi, ekoturizm, madaniy meros, barqaror rivojlanish, investitsiya, mintaqaviy iqtisodiyot.

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