



CULTURAL HERITAGE AND TOURISM IN KARAKALPAKSTAN

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the role of cultural heritage in fostering tourism development in Karakalpakstan, an autonomous republic located in the northwestern part of Uzbekistan. Using official national statistics, regional tourism data, museum reports, and international tourism analyses, the study examines how key cultural assets—most notably the Savitsky Museum and the archaeological fortresses of Ancient Khorezm—contribute to visitor flows, employment, and regional visibility. The paper further analyzes the economic and social benefits of cultural tourism and identifies structural and environmental constraints limiting sustainable growth, including infrastructural gaps and the long-term consequences of the Aral Sea ecological crisis. Based on empirical data from 2023–2025, the study concludes that while cultural tourism in Karakalpakstan is expanding steadily, strategic investment in infrastructure, professional training, digital branding, and conservation financing is essential to transform cultural heritage into a long-term engine of sustainable regional development.

Cultural heritage has become one of the most dynamic drivers of global tourism in the twenty-first century. As travelers increasingly seek authentic experiences rooted in history, identity, and local traditions, cultural tourism has gained strategic importance for many developing and transition economies. In post-Soviet Central Asia, tourism is now viewed as a vital instrument for economic diversification and international integration.

Uzbekistan has emerged as one of the most rapidly developing tourism destinations in the region following major reforms introduced after 2017. Liberalized visa regimes, large-scale infrastructure projects, and state-led tourism branding have significantly increased both international and domestic visitor flows. Within this national tourism framework, Karakalpakstan represents a unique yet underutilized destination. Despite its geographic remoteness and ecological vulnerability, the region possesses exceptional tangible and intangible cultural heritage, including world-class museum collections, ancient desert fortresses, and distinctive Karakalpak traditions.

This article aims to assess how cultural heritage contributes to tourism development in Karakalpakstan using recent statistical evidence from 2023–2025. It further identifies the principal socioeconomic benefits of cultural tourism and the structural challenges limiting its long-term sustainability.

Uzbekistan's tourism sector has shown rapid expansion in the post-pandemic period. According to official data, approximately 7 million foreign tourists visited Uzbekistan in 2023 [1]. This figure grew markedly in 2024, reaching 8.2 million international arrivals [2]. Preliminary estimates for 2025 indicate continued growth, with about 6.3 million foreign tourists entering the country during the first seven months of the year [13].

Parallel to visitor growth, tourism infrastructure has expanded at a national scale. In 2023 alone, 183 new hotels, 215 hostels, and 356 family guesthouses began operations across the country, increasing national accommodation capacity by 5,477 units to a total of 142,720 beds [1]. These macro-level developments provide favorable institutional conditions for regional tourism growth. However, disparities between central heritage destinations and peripheral regions such as Karakalpakstan remain pronounced.

Table 1. Uzbekistan: Foreign Tourist Arrivals (2023–2025)

| Year / Period | Foreign Tourists | Source |
|-------------------------|------------------|-----------------------|
| 2023 (full year) | ~7,000,000 | Kun.uz (2024) |
| 2024 (full year) | 8,200,000 | Kun.uz (2025) |
| 2025 (Jan–Jul) | ~6,300,000 | UzDaily (2025) |

The cultural flagship of Karakalpakstan is the Savitsky Museum located in Nukus. Officially known as the State Museum of Arts of the Republic of Karakalpakstan, the institution holds approximately 82,000 artworks, making it one of the largest museum collections in Central Asia [6]. The museum is internationally renowned for housing the second-largest collection of Russian avant-garde art in the world [6].

Recent data confirm the museum's central role in regional tourism. It currently attracts over 100,000 international visitors annually (Kursiv Uzbekistan, 2025). As a result, the Savitsky Museum functions not only as a cultural institution but also as a major economic and symbolic tourism hub for the entire region.

Beyond museum tourism, the desert zones of Karakalpakstan feature ancient fortresses and ruins from the Khorezm civilization—sites such as ancient fortresses and historical monuments. These historical landscapes, when preserved and promoted, can offer niche heritage-tourism experiences, attracting history and archaeology enthusiasts. The existence of such heritage contributes to the region's uniqueness and tourism potential [10]. The desert landscapes are home to monumental fortress complexes such as Ayaz-Kala, Toprak-Kala, and Kyzyl-Kala, which date back over two thousand years. These sites reflect the urban planning, military architecture, and administrative systems of the ancient Khorezm civilization.

These fortresses serve as major attractions for cultural, historical, and adventure tourism. However, limited transport access and insufficient visitor infrastructure currently constrain their full tourism potential.

Karakalpakstan also preserves a rich spectrum of intangible cultural heritage, including epic oral literature, traditional musical forms, national clothing, carpet weaving, wood carving, and ritual practices. Cultural festivals and folk performances increasingly form part of regional

tourism programs, allowing visitors to engage directly with Karakalpak identity and living traditions. Karakalpakstan's living traditions — folk music, crafts, textiles, embroidery, rituals — represent intangible cultural heritage that can enrich tourism offerings. In Uzbekistan more broadly, studies show that cultural and historical tourism plays an important role in preserving national heritage while boosting tourism [9].

Recent tourism statistics show steady growth in regional visitation. According to official regional data, approximately 200,700 foreign tourists visited Karakalpakstan in 2024 [8]. In 2025, international tourist inflows continued to rise: 199,300 foreign visitors entered the region between January and July 2025 [3]. An empirical study focused on Karakalpakstan's tourism concluded that tourism-driven infrastructure investment, cultural recognition, and increased tourist inflow significantly correlate with regional economic growth [11].

Domestic tourism is also expanding rapidly. During the first half of 2025 alone, over 1.6 million domestic tourists traveled to Karakalpakstan [5]. In economic terms, tourism exports generated approximately USD 26.1 million in revenue during the first six months of 2025 [5].

Table 2. Karakalpakstan: Tourism Indicators (2024–2025)

| Year / Period | Indicator | Value | Source |
|------------------|------------------------|------------------|------------------------------|
| 2024 (full year) | Foreign tourists | 200,700 | Karakalpakstan.travel (2025) |
| 2025 (Jan–Jul) | Foreign tourists | 199,300 | Kursiv Uzbekistan (2025a) |
| 2025 (Jan–Jun) | Domestic tourists | 1,600,000+ | Zamin.uz (2025) |
| 2025 (Jan–Jun) | Tourism export revenue | USD 26.1 million | Zamin.uz (2025) |

Cultural tourism serves as a vital contributor to local economic development in Karakalpakstan. Direct economic benefits arise through accommodation services, catering, transport, museum admissions, guiding services, and cultural event management. Indirect benefits stimulate handicraft production, small-scale agriculture, and family-based entrepreneurship.

Employment creation is particularly significant for youth and women in rural areas. Cultural tourism also strengthens motivation for heritage preservation: when local communities observe tangible economic returns from their cultural assets, they become more committed to safeguarding monuments, traditions, and artisanal skills for future generations.

Additionally, tourism enhances Karakalpakstan's international visibility. Through exhibitions, academic research, and media coverage associated with the Savitsky Museum and the Aral Sea region, Karakalpakstan is increasingly integrated into global cultural and ecological tourism discourses.

Despite positive growth trends, tourism in Karakalpakstan faces substantial structural limitations. Infrastructure outside Nukus remains underdeveloped. Many archaeological sites lack paved roads, sanitation facilities, visitor centers, and nearby accommodation options. Transport connectivity with Uzbekistan's central tourism hubs remains relatively weak.

Environmental challenges further complicate tourism development. The long-term ecological consequences of the Aral Sea desiccation—including desertification, dust storms,

water scarcity, and public health risks—negatively affect both living conditions and tourist comfort. These environmental pressures create additional risks for long-term tourism investment.

Marketing and international promotion also remain insufficient. While the Savitsky Museum enjoys global recognition, Karakalpakstan as a holistic destination is still weakly represented in global tourism branding platforms.

However, the rapid growth of tourism — without adequate regulation — risks damaging fragile heritage sites. As noted in Uzbekistan-wide heritage tourism studies, unregulated visitor flows may lead to deterioration of monuments, over-commercialization, and loss of authenticity [12]. Moreover, infrastructure in Karakalpakstan remains underdeveloped, limiting access to remote heritage sites and increasing environmental stress.

To ensure the sustainability of cultural tourism in Karakalpakstan, several strategic priorities are essential:

Infrastructure development. Targeted investment in roads, regional airports, hotels, and visitor facilities near archaeological sites is a prerequisite for tourism expansion.

Human capital and professional training. Training programs for museum professionals, tour guides, hospitality managers, and cultural entrepreneurs would substantially improve service quality and international competitiveness.

Digital branding and promotion. Modern tourism development requires strong digital storytelling. The narratives of the Savitsky Museum, the Khorezm fortresses, and Karakalpak traditions offer powerful branding potential for global cultural tourism markets.

Sustainable financing mechanisms. A portion of tourism revenues should be systematically reinvested into monument conservation, environmental rehabilitation, and community development to ensure long-term sustainability.

Cultural heritage constitutes the core comparative advantage of Karakalpakstan's tourism sector. The Savitsky Museum, the archaeological fortresses of Ancient Khorezm, and the region's living traditions form a powerful cultural base for sustainable tourism development. Empirical data from 2023–2025 confirm steady growth in both domestic and international visitation, as well as rising tourism-generated revenues [3.4].

Nevertheless, tourism development in Karakalpakstan is constrained by infrastructural deficits, ecological pressures, and limited international promotion. Sustainable growth requires integrated development policies that unite infrastructure investment, professional capacity-building, digital marketing, and conservation financing. If these conditions are met, cultural tourism can become a long-term driver of economic diversification, cultural preservation, and social resilience in Karakalpakstan.

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