

THE THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF MOUNTAIN TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN UZBEKISTAN (A CASE STUDY OF NAVOI CITY)

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the development of mountain tourism in rural settlements of the Navoi region of Uzbekistan. The study examines the theoretical foundations of mountain and rural tourism, current development trends, and practical approaches to promoting sustainable tourism in mountainous areas. Special attention is given to key tourist destinations such as the Sarmishsay Gorge, the Nurota Mountains, and Sentob village, which represent a combination of natural, cultural, and historical attractions. Based on statistical data, policy documents, and field-based observations, the research highlights the growing role of mountain tourism in regional economic development, employment generation, and preservation of cultural heritage. The findings demonstrate that improving tourism infrastructure, expanding service quality, and supporting local entrepreneurship can significantly enhance the sustainability and competitiveness of mountain tourism in the Navoi region.

Keywords: mountain tourism, rural tourism, sustainable tourism, community-based tourism, tourism infrastructure, tourism services, local entrepreneurship, regional development.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Mountain tourism holds significant promise for driving local economic development and fostering social transformation. Its ability to complement other industries, contribute to national GDP, generate employment, and spread visitor demand across seasons and regions makes it a particularly valuable sector. However, despite its growing appeal worldwide, reliable and comprehensive data on its actual scale and broader socioeconomic effects remains scarce.

To bridge this knowledge gap, a joint study conducted by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the Mountain Partnership, and the World Tourism Organization (UN Tourism) examines a sector responsible for an estimated 9% to 16% of global international tourist arrivals. The report outlines emerging trends and offers policy recommendations grounded in data and evidence. Furthermore, it explores the key factors driving the growth of mountain tourism – particularly its role in generating economic value, expanding opportunities

for local populations, and supporting the development of environmentally and socially responsible tourism products [11].

Uzbekistan's inbound tourism has grown rapidly reaching some 8.2 million foreign visitors in 2024, up from around 7 million in 2023. This growth reflects not only general tourism expansion but also rising interest in nature and mountain-based destinations [5].

In order to further develop tourism in the mountainous regions of Uzbekistan, a number of measures are being implemented. In particular, according to the Resolution of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan No. PQ-135 dated April 26, 2023, "On additional measures to accelerate the development of the country's tourism potential and to further increase the number of domestic and foreign tourists" it is stipulated that regular bus and minibus routes for tourists will be permitted through designated road categories in the mountainous areas of Jizzakh region and Bostanlik district.

According to this decision, such transportation is allowed only during the period from April 1 to November 1, and only in daylight hours, using vehicles that meet specific safety and technical requirements namely, vehicles that are less than three years old, not equipped with gas-cylinder systems, and fitted with retarder braking systems (mountain brakes), as well as navigation and tachograph devices. Furthermore, drivers must possess at least seven years of driving experience and hold a valid license for passenger transportation in order to operate these routes [3].

Navoi region attracts more and more tourists thanks to its unique natural and historical attractions. In 2024, the region was visited by more than 420 thousand foreign tourists, which is twice as much as the previous year. New tourist routes have been developed here, including a 340-kilometer-long "tourist ring" that covers more than 60 sites such as Nurata, Karmana and Kiziltepa. In addition, the number of tour companies and routes has increased significantly, which contributes to the improvement of tourism infrastructure and attracting investment in the industry. These efforts, along with the opening of health facilities and the development of an ecological tourism map, make Navoi region an important part of Uzbekistan's tourism industry, stimulating its economic development and increasing interest among both local and international tourists [6].

2.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopts qualitative and descriptive research methods. Data were collected from official statistics, policy documents, field observations, and secondary academic sources. The research focuses on assessing mountain tourism development in the Navoi region, with a particular emphasis on community-based tourism initiatives, infrastructure, tourist flows, and sustainable development practices. Analytical methods include descriptive statistics,

comparative analysis with previous research, and evaluation of policy measures and local tourism practices.

3.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Mountain tourism in Uzbekistan and Central Asia has attracted increasing academic attention due to its potential to stimulate economic growth, promote local culture, and support sustainable development. According to Narzullaev Umidjon Ortiqovich (2025), Navoi region possesses significant tourism potential because of its rich historical heritage, unique natural landscapes, and strategic geographic location. The study highlights key attractions such as Sarmishsay Gorge, Aydarkul Lake, and ancient monuments like Rabat-i Malik, noting that while government initiatives exist, tourism in the region remains underutilized due to insufficient promotion, limited infrastructure, and a need for more sustainable tourism planning. Narzullaev emphasizes the importance of ecotourism and cultural tourism as avenues for sustainable development, highlighting the necessity of stronger state support, investment, and improved marketing strategies to enhance visibility both nationally and internationally [2].

2. Building on these insights, Alibekova and Nasirov (2021) examine the structural and organizational barriers to international mountain tourism in Uzbekistan. Their study identifies weak transport connectivity, limited accommodation in remote mountain areas, inadequate compliance with international service and safety standards, and a shortage of professionally trained personnel as the main obstacles to growth. The authors conclude that without targeted investments and improved marketing strategies, Uzbekistan's mountain tourism potential cannot be fully realized [4].

3. Extending the regional perspective, Shokirov, Abdykadyrova, Dear, and Nowrojee (2014) provide a research review of mountain tourism sustainability in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Their study highlights that while mountain tourism can contribute to economic growth and environmental conservation, research in the region remains fragmented, and there is limited empirical evidence on socio-economic impacts, environmental management, and sustainable tourism planning. They stress the need for applied research, stronger collaboration between government, local communities, and researchers, and the development of strategies to ensure tourism supports long-term sustainable development [1].

Taken together, these studies indicate that Central Asian mountain tourism faces both structural and sustainability-related challenges, including infrastructure deficiencies, limited promotion, gaps in service standards, and insufficient data-driven planning. While earlier studies largely focus on potential and challenges, the present research on mountain tourism in the Navoi region builds on these foundations by providing recent empirical evidence, local case studies, and practical examples of community-based and sustainable tourism practices, particularly in the Nurota Mountains, Sarmishsay Gorge, and Sentob village. This positions the current study as both a continuation and an advancement of the existing literature, offering insights into the

actual development processes and opportunities for sustainable mountain tourism in Uzbekistan.

4.0 RESULTS

The Navoi region attracts increasing numbers of tourists due to its unique natural and historical attractions. In 2024, the region received over 420,000 foreign tourists, double the number from the previous year. New tourist routes, including a 340-kilometer “tourist ring,” cover more than 60 sites such as Nurata, Karmana, and Kiziltepa. The number of tour companies and routes has increased significantly, improving tourism infrastructure and attracting investment.

Key destinations include:

Sarmishsay Gorge: Over 5,000 petroglyphs depicting human and animal figures, hunting scenes, and geometric patterns. The site reflects the region’s ancient cultural heritage and attracts cultural and historical tourism.

Nurota Mountains: A unique natural landscape with diverse ecosystems, endemic species, and geological formations. The mountains are significant for biodiversity, scientific research, and potential UNESCO heritage recognition.

Sentob Village: A Tourism Village with over 30 entrepreneurial entities, 20 family guest houses, and 3 hostels. Visitors can experience traditional village life, local cuisine, and ecotourism activities such as hiking and horseback riding.

Despite these achievements, challenges remain in infrastructure, service quality, and promotion. Tourist accessibility is limited by transport conditions, and awareness among international audiences is still low.

5.0 DISCUSSION

The study’s findings align with previous research by Narzullaev (2025), Alibekova and Nasirov (2021), and Shokirov et al. (2014), confirming that infrastructure, promotion, and service quality continue to influence mountain tourism development in Uzbekistan. Transport limitations, safety standards, and accommodation gaps remain challenges.

However, this research also highlights positive developments at the regional and local levels. The Navoi region has experienced rapid growth in tourist arrivals, and destinations such as Sarmishsay, Nurota Mountains, and Sentob village show tangible evidence of tourism development. Community-based initiatives, family guest houses, and diversified tourism services contribute to economic growth, employment generation, and cultural preservation.

Compared to previous studies, this research provides recent empirical data, demonstrating practical progress in rural tourism. It emphasizes sustainability, environmental conservation, and digital promotion strategies, including social media campaigns and interactive tools, which enhance tourist experiences while protecting natural and cultural heritage.

Overall, mountain tourism in the Navoi region is transitioning from potential to practical development. Through infrastructure improvements, community engagement, sustainable practices, and effective promotion, the region can overcome challenges identified in earlier studies and establish itself as a leading destination for sustainable mountain tourism in Uzbekistan. Continued investment, policy support, and monitoring are essential to maximize economic, cultural, and environmental benefits.

Based on this, we put forward the following two hypotheses in our research:

H1. What are the most popular and attractive tourist destinations in the Navoi region?

Table 1. Number and Categories of Cultural Heritage Sites in the Navoi Region

No	Category of Cultural Heritage Sites	Republican Importance	Local Importance	Total
1	Archaeological sites	0	100	100
2	Architectural monuments	15	51	66
3	Monumental art objects	0	60	60
4	Sacred and Pilgrimage sites	3	10	13
	Total	18	221	239

Source: Compiled by the author based on data from the International Journal of History and Political Sciences (ISSN 2771–2222).

The data presented in Table 1. demonstrate that the Navoi region possesses a substantial and diverse cultural heritage base, comprising a total of 239 registered cultural heritage sites. The distribution of sites by category reveals a clear dominance of archaeological heritage, which accounts for 100 sites, representing the largest share of all cultural assets in the region. This highlights the historical depth of the territory and its strong potential for archaeological, educational, and cultural tourism. Architectural monuments form the second-largest category with 66 sites, including 15 objects of republican importance, which is the highest number of nationally significant sites among all categories. This indicates the particular cultural and historical value of architectural heritage at the national level. Monumental art objects, totaling 60 sites, are predominantly classified as locally significant, reflecting their importance for regional identity and cultural expression. Sacred and pilgrimage sites, although limited in

number with only 13 locations, hold special significance due to their spiritual, religious, and tourism value, particularly for pilgrimage and domestic tourism development. Overall, the predominance of locally important heritage sites suggests the need for targeted regional conservation policies, while the presence of republican-level monuments creates opportunities for national recognition and sustainable tourism development in the Navoi region [2].

Navoi region is the youngest in Uzbekistan. Its administrative center is the city of Navoi, which was founded in 1958. The place for the construction of the city was not chosen by chance. The mining and metallurgical industry is actively developing here. Navoi region is located in the central part of Uzbekistan. The north-west of the region borders with the Kyzylkum plateau, in the East the region is surrounded by the Nurata mountains. The southern part of the region is washed by the Zarafshan river. The region has an ancient history. Valuable archaeological finds were found in the Sarmyshsay gorge, and ancient rock paintings were found on the southern slope of the Nurata mountains. One of the most beautiful places in the region, lake Aydarkul is a place of pristine beauty. The region once had trade routes that were of great importance for those years. On this land is located the religious complex of Chashma, as well as the remains of a once-majestic fortress built in the 11th century Rabat-I-Malik. The region was named after the Uzbek poet, philosopher and statesman Alisher Navoi. In his works, the poet highly appreciated and glorified loyalty to the cause, friendship, brotherhood, modesty, truthfulness, conscientiousness, and devotion to enlightenment. Today, Navoi region is an industrial center, where the well-known Navoi mining and metallurgical combine is located, which is engaged in the production of high-grade gold, as well as other export products. It was in Navoi region that the first free economic zone "Navoi" was established in our country.

5.1 Sarmishsay Gorge

One of the most fascinating places in the Navoi region is the Sarmishsay Gorge, which has long attracted tourists with its mysterious petroglyphs dating back more than 10,000 years. All the rock carvings were created by chiseling or engraving the stone using metal or stone tools. The oldest images were carved using ornamental, openwork, contour, or mixed techniques.

More than 5,000 petroglyphs have been discovered on the rock surfaces within the gorge and its surrounding area. These images are covered with a dark or brown patina, and their subjects are highly diverse. Today, researchers have identified at least 35 thematic categories of carvings depicting human figures, weapons, household tools, geometric patterns, and hunting scenes.

Floral and faunal motifs are also common, featuring various animal species, some of which are already extinct. Among them are mountain goats, argali (wild sheep), bison, primitive bulls, wild horses, camels, kulans, deer, wild boars, saigas, and gazelles. Representations of predators such as lions, wolves, snow leopards, jackals, foxes, leopards, and cheetahs can also be found.

Of particular interest are the wild bull images created in the bio-triangular style typical of the Upper Paleolithic culture. In addition to the petroglyphs, Arabic inscriptions of various types can also be found among the rocks of Sarmishsay. Location: Navbahor District, Navoi Region, Uzbekistan [7].

5.2 Nurota Mountains

The Nurota Mountains form a rugged massif comprising three low-lying western extensions of the Gissar-Alai system – namely the Karatau, Aktau, and Nurotau ridges. The range takes its name from the most prominent of these, the Nurota ridge, whose highest point, Hayatbashi, rises to 2,169 meters. Collectively, the Nurota mountain system spans a total area of no less than 8,000 square kilometers.

Structurally, the range is made up of two parallel ridges divided by a wide longitudinal depression – stretching up to 25 kilometers across in the northwest – those slopes in opposite directions, draining toward both the northwest and southeast from a gently defined watershed valley.

In terms of elevation, the Nurota Mountains are relatively modest. The northern ridge peaks at its center, near the Khayat Pass at approximately 2,300 meters, before gradually descending toward both the east and west. Compared to their southern counterparts, the northern slopes of both ridges tend to be steeper and shorter. The southern ridge, meanwhile, fragments into a series of distinct massifs which, running from southeast to northwest, are known as Chumkartau, Gobduntau, Karakchatau, Aktau, Bakhiltau, and the low-lying Pashattau massif. Elevations across these massifs vary considerably, declining from roughly 2,900 meters at Chumkartau in the east to just 600–700 meters at Pashattau in the west [9].

5.3 Sentob village

Between the Nurata Mountains and the Kyzylkum Desert of the Navoi region lies the small village of Sentob. Owing to its remote location from urban centers, the village has successfully preserved its authenticity and the traditional characteristics typical of Central Asian rural settlements. The harmony between nature, local inhabitants, traditional cuisine made from homegrown fruits and vegetables, and the distinctive wooden architecture reflects the enduring cultural identity of the area. The ancient dwellings are notable for their narrow entrances, low ceilings, and unique architectural forms, which convey the simplicity and originality of rural life.

Despite its historical and rustic atmosphere, the village provides modern amenities for visitors. Tourists are accommodated in comfortable cottages while being able to experience traditional village life through activities such as horseback riding, exploring the surrounding landscapes, and hiking in the nearby mountains. Sentob remains a vibrant and dynamic community. Over

the years, it has become increasingly popular among both domestic and international tourists, resulting in the establishment of guest houses and recreational facilities designed in a national style. These accommodations are fully equipped to meet the comfort and service standards expected by modern travelers [8].

Notably, on March 17, 2023, Sentob officially received the status of a Tourism Village. At present, more than 30 entrepreneurial entities operate within the settlement. A consistent influx of foreign tourists from countries including the United Kingdom, France, Austria, Germany, Italy, Russia, and others is observed throughout the year. The village currently hosts 20 family guest houses and 3 hostels, all of which display officially approved signage in accordance with established standards. Furthermore, over 15 types of tourism services have been developed, reflecting the growing diversification of the local tourism sector and its contribution to the region's sustainable development [10].

H2. Tourism in the mountainous areas of Navoi region can be further developed to enhance economic, cultural, and social benefits.

Navoi region has all the necessary conditions to further develop tourism, particularly in its mountainous areas, by increasing the flow of tourists and better attracting them to tourist sites. Prominent destinations such as Sarmishsay, Nurata, and Sentob village are well-established and supported by adequate infrastructure.

This perspective finds further grounding in the guiding principles of the UNESCO World Heritage Convention, which are especially relevant when applied to the Nurota Mountains. Positioned at the ecological crossroads between the Pamir-Alai and Tien Shan mountain systems and the expansive desert lowlands of Turan, the Nurota Mountains represent a botanically exceptional zone. This transitional setting has given rise to a distinctive flora that blends mountain and desert species, while also sheltering a notable concentration of endemic and relict plant varieties. Among the most striking features of the landscape are ancient stands of trees and shrubs that have persisted in the shelter of deep, narrow gorges.

As a whole, the Nurota Mountains represent a landscape of extraordinary natural and cultural significance, embodying values that transcend regional boundaries. The area's impressive geological features, remarkable biological diversity, and deep-rooted historical legacy collectively position it as a strong candidate for designation as a site of Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) in accordance with UNESCO criteria.

The Nurota Mountains encompass a wide variety of ecosystems and habitats that make a substantial contribution to biodiversity across the broader region. The area supports many plant and animal species that are either found nowhere else or face the risk of extinction. Differences in elevation across the landscape give rise to clearly defined ecological zones, spanning from dry desert scrublands at lower altitudes to verdant riverside forests in sheltered valleys. This

biological richness serves not only as a foundation for scientific inquiry but also as a vital component of worldwide conservation strategies. Preserving such environments reflects the shared responsibility of the global community to protect Earth's living heritage.

From a geological standpoint, the Nurota Mountains present a visually striking terrain sculpted by long-term tectonic activity, manifested in sheer cliffs, deep gorges, and unusual rock formations. The occurrence of ancient volcanic materials and mineral deposits offers researchers rare windows into the geological history of Central Asia, underlining the area's considerable value for education and earth sciences.

Beyond their natural attributes, the Nurota Mountains carry deep cultural and historical meaning. The region has been continuously inhabited by diverse ethnic communities over many centuries, each leaving behind a layered legacy of customs, languages, and spiritual practices. At the foot of the mountains lies the ancient city of Nurota, a testament to thousands of years of human settlement and architectural achievement. Archaeological remnants – including petroglyphs carved several millennia ago – illuminate the longstanding relationship between people and their natural surroundings, offering valuable perspectives on the cultural trajectory of Central Asia.

The mountains also hold profound spiritual significance for surrounding communities, particularly among both Islamic and pre-Islamic traditions. Scattered throughout the range are sacred shrines and places of veneration that draw pilgrims from across the region. This enduring spiritual connection to the landscape reflects a universal human tendency to find meaning in nature, lending the site a dimension of value that extends well beyond its physical and ecological characteristics.

6.0 CONCLUSION

The Nurota Mountains stand as a compelling example of where natural splendor, ecological importance, and cultural legacy intersect in a single, cohesive landscape. Their significance on a global scale stem not merely from their biological diversity and geological character, but equally from the wealth of historical narratives, spiritual traditions, and human heritage embedded within the region. Granting these mountains recognition as a UNESCO World Heritage Site would serve as a formal acknowledgment of their universal importance, while simultaneously strengthening ongoing efforts to conserve and protect this irreplaceable environment for the benefit of generations to come.

However, promotion of mountain tourism requires strengthening. Official tourism websites and international marketing campaigns are still insufficient. Expanding promotion to social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Telegram can reach broader and younger audiences. Local communities and entrepreneurs should be actively involved, promoting local products, crafts, and cultural events. Emphasis on eco-tourism and sustainability, including

environmental education for visitors, is crucial. Improving services and safety standards in transportation, accommodations, and local facilities will ensure a safe and enjoyable experience, ultimately supporting sustainable development of mountain tourism in Navoi region.

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