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FULL LENGTH ARTICLE

Sport tourism as a Driver of Soft Power and Regional Growth

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ABSTRACT

The research shows the currently increasing role of the industry of sport tourism in the Republic of Uzbekistan and how it impacts on the economic and social development of the state from 2018 to 2025. Based on secondary data from international and national organizations and analytical think centres, the paper analyses trends in tourist arrivals, tourism revenue and the impact of government reforms: visa liberalisation and investment in sport facilities. The results of this study show that sport tourism is a crucial factor in economic diversification, aiding job creation, regional development and the growth of small and medium businesses. International competitions such as boxing or judo championships raise the country's status globally and also contribute to cultural interaction. Due to reforms and increased interest in active travel, tourism in Uzbekistan has recovered after the pandemic. However, research on how sport affects the economy of the country and small businesses remains limited. Overall, the results indicate that sport tourism is very important for the development of Uzbekistan. It can help the country reach its long-term goals and become one of the best places for active and sport tourism in Central Asia.

Keywords: Sport tourism ▪ Economic development ▪ Visa liberalization ▪ Soft power

1. INTRODUCTION

Sports tourism has become one of the fastest-growing areas of the global tourism industry. Today, people travel not only for leisure but also to stay active, exercise, and explore new destinations for health benefits. Sports tourism divides into two main categories: passive tourism and active tourism [1]. Passive tourism is when visitors attend major events such as the Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cup. Active tourism is defined as visitors participating in activities such as hiking, cycling, or mountain climbing, which are becoming increasingly popular. Sports tourism is also part of the larger trend of active tourism, which is gaining recognition from the UNWTO and the International Olympic Committee [2]. In 2023, sports tourism was valued at USD 609 billion and was expected to experience 16% growth in 2024–2030, indicating its potential impact on global economic growth and social development [3].

After the pandemic, interest in sport and active travel increased as more people sought to improve their physical health. This interest is creating new opportunities for nations looking to use sports tourism as a means of economic and social development. Active tourism encourages investment, infrastructure improvement, collaboration with cultural and creative industries, and the development of local communities and small businesses [2].

Uzbekistan has the possibility to become a world-class sports tourism destination. State-protected sites alone number over 8,210, and many sites are included in the UNESCO list [4]. Tourism in Uzbekistan is a relatively new sector that has experienced rapid growth in recent years. Improvements in visa policy and visa liberalization for over 90 countries in 2023 have led to an explosive growth in the number of tourists. Uzbekistan has supported the growing tourism sector with construction that has enhanced travel services, improved lodging options, and bolstered the number of trained personnel

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available to serve tourists. Sports tourism can further expand the sector and support Uzbekistan's goal of reaching 20 million foreign tourists in 2040 [5, 6]. Sports and outdoor activities such as hiking, cycling, and water sports are available for tourists to participate in and enjoy. The rapid growth of tourism in Uzbekistan has led to the following research questions:

- How has the number of tourists to Uzbekistan changed in recent years?
- How does sports tourism impact Uzbekistan's international reputation?
- How has the development of sports tourism improved infrastructure in various regions of the country?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Tourism has long been considered a powerful vehicle for the economic development and growth of nations, particularly developing countries. Tourism plays a significant role in generating foreign exchange. In this context, sport tourism is emerging as one of the fastest-growing segments and provides more opportunities for economic diversification in Uzbekistan. According to the Institute of Macroeconomic and Regional Studies (IMRS), the establishment and facilitation of tourism- and sports-related services have positively influenced the economy and contributed to its development. This is reflected in service exports, new employment, and infrastructure such as transport, accommodation, and sports facilities. International tournaments contribute to a nation's international prestige, sports diplomacy, and global exposure [7].

The Tashkent Grand Slam has become a recurring international judo event, and the International Judo Federation confirmed in 2025 that it would continue through 2028 [8]. However, the tourism industry experienced serious adversity during the pandemic, including decreased arrivals and event cancellations. In post-pandemic Uzbekistan, recovery has been supported by government reforms, new investments, and a high-profile sport tourism push. Existing research has demonstrated that sport tourism generates returns for host communities through economic prosperity, job creation, infrastructure growth, and the expansion of soft power [9, 10]. However, academic discussion of sport tourism in relation to GDP, SME development, and long-term competitiveness remains scarce, a gap this study aims to address.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in three theoretical perspectives:

1. The Tourism-Led Growth Hypothesis (TLGH) proposes that tourism development leads to economic growth through positive effects on foreign exchange earnings, job generation, and infrastructure investment [11]. In Uzbekistan, this perspective relates to visitor spending associated with sports visits, employment in hospitality and transport, and capital inflows for sports facilities.
2. Soft Power Theory holds that countries can develop a positive global reputation through cultural appeal and global connectedness, rather than through military force or economic pressure. Sport tourism therefore operates as an instrument of public diplomacy and international branding [12].
3. The Destination Competitiveness Model proposes that tourism competitiveness depends on core resources, supporting factors, destination management, and qualifying determinants [13].

Together, these theories provide an analytical basis for understanding how sports tourism contributes to economic growth, infrastructure modernization, and Uzbekistan's international reputation.

2.2 Research Gaps

Despite growing literature on the economic impact of sport tourism, three significant research gaps remain. First, limited research examines sport tourism's contribution to GDP growth in Central Asian states [14, 15]. Second, the relationship between international sporting events and SME development in emerging markets lacks empirical investigation [16, 17]. Third, few studies analyze the long-term sustainability of sport-tourism-driven infrastructure investments in developing economies [18, 19, 20]. This research addresses these gaps by providing evidence from Uzbekistan's experience between 2018 and 2025.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a descriptive-analytical approach using secondary quantitative data to examine sport tourism's impact on Uzbekistan's economy from 2018 to 2025. Data were collected from official government and presidential publications and portals; Uzbekistan Tourism Committee statistics; analytical reports of the Institute of Macroeconomic and Regional Studies and national statistics committees; reports from the World Travel and Tourism Council and international organizations including the UN, FIFA, FIDE, IJF, IBA, and Brand Value Index; academic books and journals; and verified news sources reporting on major sporting events.

3.1 The Analysis Involved

The analysis involved several interrelated methods. First, trends in tourist arrivals and tourism revenues from 2018 to 2025 were analyzed. Second, tourism's contribution to GDP was calculated using comparative analysis. Third, government policy documents were examined through content analysis. Finally, descriptive statistics were applied to identify patterns and growth trajectories.

3.2 Study Period Rationale

The chosen study period of 2018–2025 covers different phases in the evolution of tourism in Uzbekistan. The year 2018 acts as a baseline before tourism growth reforms in the country. The year 2019 was the first year of tourism growth resulting from changes in visa policies and increased international tourism promotion. The years 2020–2021 were marked by global tourism disruption due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The period 2022–2025 represents recovery and growth, as tourism resumed and government support for the sector increased.

3.3 Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, it depends on secondary data, which narrows the scope of the analysis; due to the timing of data reporting, official records may also be unreliable or contain discrepancies. Another limitation is the lack of data on sports tourism as a subsector of general tourism. Finally, the study lacks primary data from stakeholders and tourism visitors, such as survey responses, as well as sufficient secondary and primary data specifically about sport tourism.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study of sports tourism in Uzbekistan over 2018–2025 demonstrates a visible upward trend in tourist arrivals and their contribution to the economy following the introduction of a new visa policy. The number of countries whose citizens have visa-free access grew from 9 to 90 and led to a substantial increase in international travellers [5]. Arrivals grew from approximately 2.7 million to almost 8.6 million in the first nine months of 2025, a 112.5% increase compared with the same period in 2024 [6]. This growth reflects international interest in active tourism and significant government reforms.

Investment in infrastructure, including hotels, hostels, sports facilities, and travel agencies, has grown quickly, creating jobs and encouraging small and medium enterprises to develop business activities [5]. International events, including the Tashkent Grand Slam, have raised Uzbekistan's profile as a sports host and may support tourism-related business activity [12, 16, 20, 8, 21].

The pandemic temporarily disrupted tourism and sports events through cancellations and reduced arrivals. Post-pandemic recovery has been strong due to government reforms, strategic investment in sport tourism, and increasing public interest in healthy and active lifestyles [5]. Active tourism has also grown, drawing on Uzbekistan's natural variety of mountains, rivers, and deserts and centered around hiking, cycling, mountaineering, and water sports. Sports tourism has also gained policy attention: in 2025, the Tourism Committee convened a roundtable on active and sports tourism and developed a roadmap for the sector [22]. In international judo, Tashkent's Grand Slam attracted athletes from 23 countries in 2025, and the International Judo Federation confirmed that the event would continue through 2028 [21, 8]. The government's 2030 targets include attracting 20 million foreign tourists and raising tourism's share of GDP to 7% [23].

Despite these encouraging results, several problems remain. There is a dearth of literature directly linking sports tourism to GDP growth, SME development, and long-term competitiveness from an academic perspective. Moreover, the country needs to continue developing infrastructure and guide training and promoting lesser-known regions in order to maintain this momentum while fully capitalizing on Uzbekistan's potential as a top sports tourism destination. Overall, the findings suggest that sports tourism in Uzbekistan contributes not only to economic and infrastructure development but also to the country's international image and social outcomes for local communities. By continuing to develop the sector strategically, Uzbekistan can consolidate its position in the global tourism market while contributing to broader economic and social objectives.

Figure 1 shows four distinct periods in Uzbekistan's tourism development. During the pre-reform era (2013–2016), arrivals remained largely stagnant, hovering between 1.9 and 2.0 million, reflecting limited international promotion and a restrictive visa regime. A decisive turning point came with visa liberalization reforms from 2017 onwards, progressively expanding visa-free access from 9 to 90 countries. Arrivals more than doubled from 2.7 million in 2017 to 5.3 million in 2018, reaching a pre-pandemic peak of 6.7 million in 2019, a 253% increase over the 2016 baseline in three years. The pandemic period (2020–2021) caused a severe contraction, with arrivals falling to 1.5 million in 2020. Recovery began in 2021 but remained fragile at 1.9 million visitors. By 2022, arrivals had recovered to 5.2 million (the 2019 level). By the end of 2025, an estimated 11.5 million international tourists visited Uzbekistan, 73% above the 2019 pre-pandemic peak.

Figure 2 demonstrates the evolution of tourism's macroeconomic contribution to Uzbekistan's economy from 2017 to 2025. The period between 2017 and 2019 marked extraordinary expansion in the tourism industry, driven primarily by the government's sweeping visa liberalization reforms. Tourism revenue doubled from USD 835 million in 2017 to USD 1.679 billion in 2019. The COVID-19 pandemic severely impacted the sector, with revenue collapsing to USD 395 million in 2020 (0.66% of GDP), a 76.5% decline from 2019. These figures underscore tourism's vulnerability, especially international sport and event tourism, to external shocks and reinforce the case for building resilience through product diversification and domestic market development.

The recovery phase from 2022 to 2025 has proven structurally transformative rather than merely restorative. Tourism revenue surpassed its pre-pandemic peak in 2023, reaching USD 3.52 billion in 2024, more than double the 2019 figure. By 2024, tourism's share of GDP had climbed to 3.06%, exceeding the government's interim target and placing the country on track for its 2030 goal of a 7% GDP contribution [23]. Preliminary estimates for 2025 indicate revenues surpassing USD 4.8 billion, approximately 3.56% of an estimated USD 135 billion GDP. These figures establish tourism as one of Uzbekistan's primary growth drivers.

4.1 Impact in Various Spheres

In terms of the economic impact of visa liberalization, tourism arrivals rose from 2.7 million in 2017 to nearly 11.5 million, bringing in USD 2 billion in revenue. Although the pandemic caused a temporary halt, recovery was accelerated by visa liberalization and strategic infrastructure investment. During the pandemic recovery period, tourism was estimated to contribute 2.5–3.0% to GDP [24, 25, 26, 27].

International reputation is enhanced when a country hosts and manages major sporting events. Well-planned and well-executed events signal political stability, good management, and cultural openness. Hosting major events can influence global media coverage and, in turn, investment, tourism, and partnerships, bringing a country into the international realm. According to the Brand Finance report, Uzbekistan's national brand value and GDP were ranked at number 55 in 2025, reflecting confidence in its tourism, investment climate, and

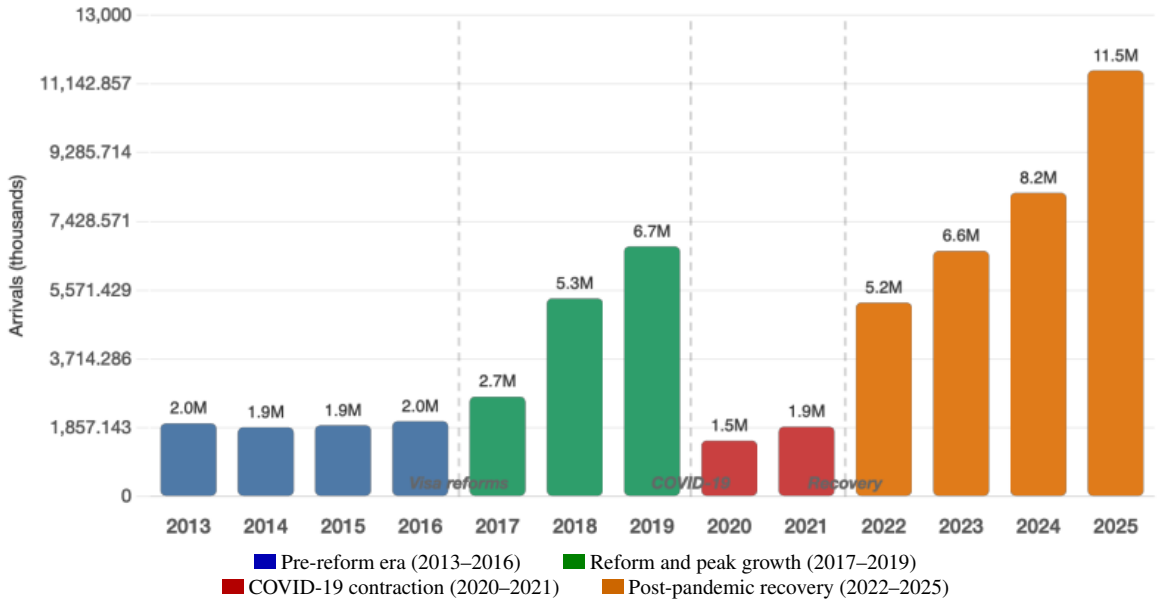


Figure 1. International tourist arrivals during 2013–2025.

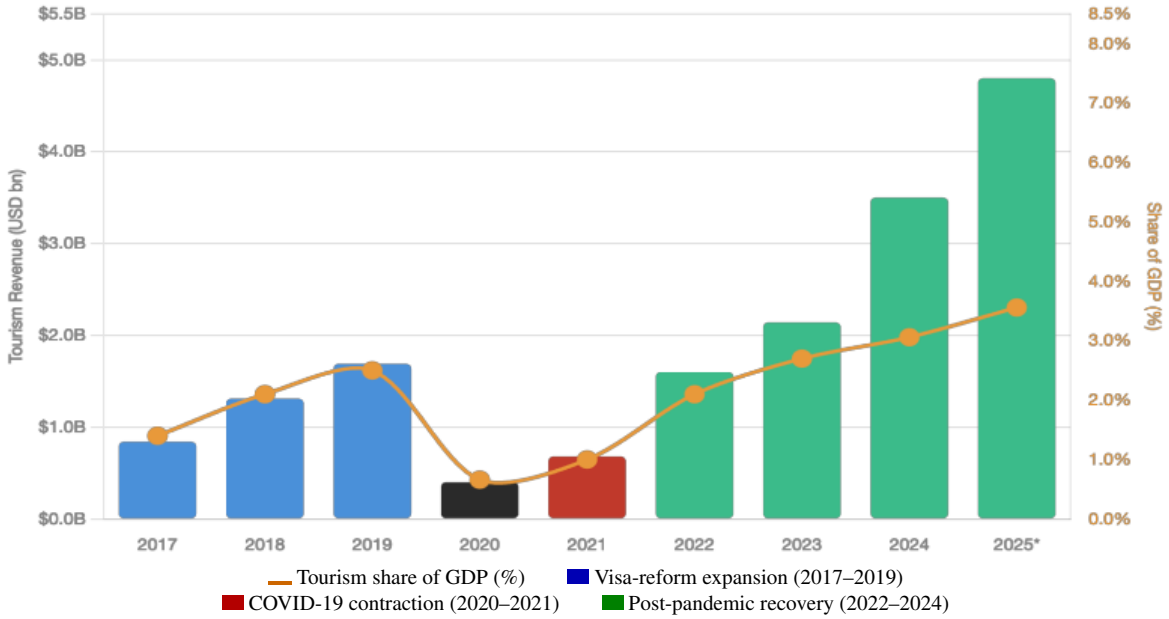


Figure 2. Tourism's contribution to GDP in Uzbekistan (2017–2025).

economic development [28]. The organization of international sports events, such as judo and boxing championships and football tournaments, has contributed to Uzbekistan's visibility and soft power. The country is now a recognized destination for cultural and active tourism.

Economic multipliers for sports events are estimated at 3–5 times spending on lodging, food, transport, and retail [29]. Sports venues created around 12,000 direct jobs and 35,000 indirect jobs in the hospitality industry [30]. Sports tourism has also encouraged SME growth, in line with global tourism patterns showing increased demand for activity and adventure travel. Prominent sporting events demonstrate this progress in Uzbekistan:

- Tashkent has consolidated its position as a regional judo destination through international competitions from 2022 to 2025. The 2022 World Championships, held for the first time in Central Asia, brought 571 judokas from 82 countries [31]; the 2023 Grand Slam featured 364 athletes from 49 countries [32]; and the 2025 Grand Slam brought 242 judokas representing 23 countries [21]. The IJF also confirmed that the event would continue through 2028 [8].
+
- Uzbekistan's achievements have strengthened its global positioning and supported economic growth through sports tourism. The IBA Men's World Boxing Championship in Tashkent had a record prize pool of USD 5.2 million, with 538 boxers from 107 countries participating [33]; the event improved the city's hospitality, transport, and retail sectors. Uzbekistan also ranked 13th globally at the 2024 Paris Olympics [34]. Its national boxing team led the medal standings with five men's gold medals. With six gold medals, Uzbekistan's boxing team also led at the 2025 World Boxing Championships [35]. These achievements in boxing inspired and supported the country's soft power

and economic growth. +

- In other sports, Uzbekistan qualified for the FIFA World Cup for the first time in 2025 [36], and Javokhir Sindarov won the 2025 FIDE Chess World Cup and USD 120,000 [37]. +

+ +All of these events and achievements improved the country's global recognition, developed infrastructure, and boosted sport tourism. + +

4.2 Infrastructure Development

+The development of Olympic City in Tashkent exemplifies the rapid growth of professional sports infrastructure in the country. Over the three years from 2022 to 2025, Olympic City Tashkent was completed. The complex spans about 100 hectares and includes a stadium, velodrome, aquatics venue, training areas, facilities to support athletes, a Paralympic dormitory, and a sports scientific-practical center [38]. + +At the same time, mountain getaways such as Amirsoy and Chimgan in Tashkent region are being transformed into year-round resorts, offering accommodation, aerial tramways, ski tracks, and recreational amenities. Zamin in Jizzakh region remains a popular spot for health and recovery, while Charvak in Tashkent region is seeing extensive resort development for mountain-lake tourism, relaxation, and sports services. These facilities are built to international standards, generating long-term capital investment through the implementation and modernization of facilities and tourism development. These initiatives demonstrate how Uzbekistan is integrating top-tier athletics with destination expansion to establish a contemporary, globally competitive sports setting.

5. CONCLUSION

This study examined sport tourism as an important driver of Uzbekistan's economic diversification, infrastructure modernization, and international recognition. Uzbekistan 2.0 has brought positive changes through visa-regime liberalization, investment in sports-related infrastructure, and hosting global sports competitions. These changes have led to a significant increase in tourist arrivals, the development of small and medium enterprises, and an increase in the country's soft power. With continued investment, appropriate policies, and sustainable development approaches, Uzbekistan is likely to become the sports tourism destination of choice in Central Asia. Improved economic returns, together with Uzbekistan's 2040 development vision, will ensure that sport tourism supports cultural exchange, regional integration, and nation-building.

The results indicate that sport tourism in Uzbekistan will bring not only an influx of tourists but also longer-term changes in the structure of the economy and the country's reputation. The development of Olympic facilities, mountain resorts, and adventure tourism sites illustrates that sport tourism is no longer just a specialized industry but an integral part of national progress. However, improved coordination, enhanced data collection, and more sustainable planning are necessary to fully capitalize on the lasting advantages of this sector. Institutional coordination and statistical monitoring need to improve. Without a clear distinction between sport tourism and general tourism data, assessments of return on investment remain limited. By implementing more advanced data systems, providing professional training, and planning for balanced regional development, Uzbekistan would be better positioned to measure its performance, attract targeted investment, and ensure sustainable growth in the sport tourism industry.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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