Modern Challenges: E-Tourism in Uzbekistan, Features and Development. (ASEAN Experience)

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Abstract: The article is devoted to the development of e-tourism in Uzbekistan, which contributes to the development of the services sector not only in the country, but also in the global economy. It is shown that without work on problems in the tourism sector in Uzbekistan, we will not be able to increase the potential of the country. As examples of how a country with a developed e-tourism infrastructure in the tourism sector were chosen ASEAN countries. The main goal now is the development of electronic services through some resources.

Key words: tourism, electronic tourism, ASEAN, traveler, Islamic tourism, tourist, electronic services.

1. Introduction

The number of foreign tourists arriving in Uzbekistan in the period from January to October 2023 reached 4.9 million people. It is noted that over the past three years the flow of these tourists has almost tripled, despite the fact that in 2021 their number amounted to 1.8 million people.

In 2023, Uzbekistan plans to see sustainable growth in the tourism sector, which is determined by a number of factors, such as attracting investment, modernizing infrastructure, developing cultural tourism and improving conditions for business tourism.

After the pandemic period, Uzbekistan has observed an accelerated pace of modernization and development of the tourism sector. Attracting investment has become one of the key directions of government policy, which has made it possible to increase the number of new tourist facilities and improve conditions for accommodating tourists.

According to statistical data from the State Committee of the Statistical Office of the Republic of Uzbekistan, the results of last year show that the number of tourists arriving in Uzbekistan has almost reached the pre-pandemic level of 2019.

In 2023, the republic was visited by more than 6.6 million tourists, which is a quarter or 1.4 million people more than the same figure for 2022. During the pandemic, about 1.5 million people arrived in Uzbekistan, and in 2021 - 1.8 million tourists.

Over the decades, tourism has reached and tried to become one of the fastest growing sector of economy in the world. New destinations, places and touristic entertainments have been developed in order to reach high level of growth in the country's economy. Today, the business volume of tourism equals or even exceeds oil exports, food or automobile markets.

According to WTTC (World Tourism&Travel Council) contribution of tourism and travel to world GDP increased rapidly over the last years. In 2022, it endowed US$2.3 trillion and 109 million jobs worldwide, overall sector contributed US$7.6 trillion to global economy and supported 292 million jobs which was 10,2 % of world's GDP. Tourism sector is export sector, where international tourist spends money in foreign countries. In conformity with WTTC, tourism sector accounted almost 30 % of world services exports. It was high growth in direct Tourism and Travel GDP in 2022. South East Asia and South Asia was fastest growing world regions with growth of around 6,5-7%, whereas Central Asian countries growth was 2,8 %. According to World Travel and Tourism Council, rapid growth was seen in tourism developed countries such as Thailand (10,7 %) , Philippines (8,9 %), Singapore (8,7 %) and Indonesia (5,8%). These countries are some of the countries which saw their Travel and Tourism sectors outperform the general economy most importantly. For instance, 32,529,588 tourist travelled to Thailand in 2022, where average each tourist spent US$ 150 per day.

Figure 1. Direct Tourism and Travel GDP Contribution Growth in 2023. (World Travel and Tourism council, www.wttc.com)
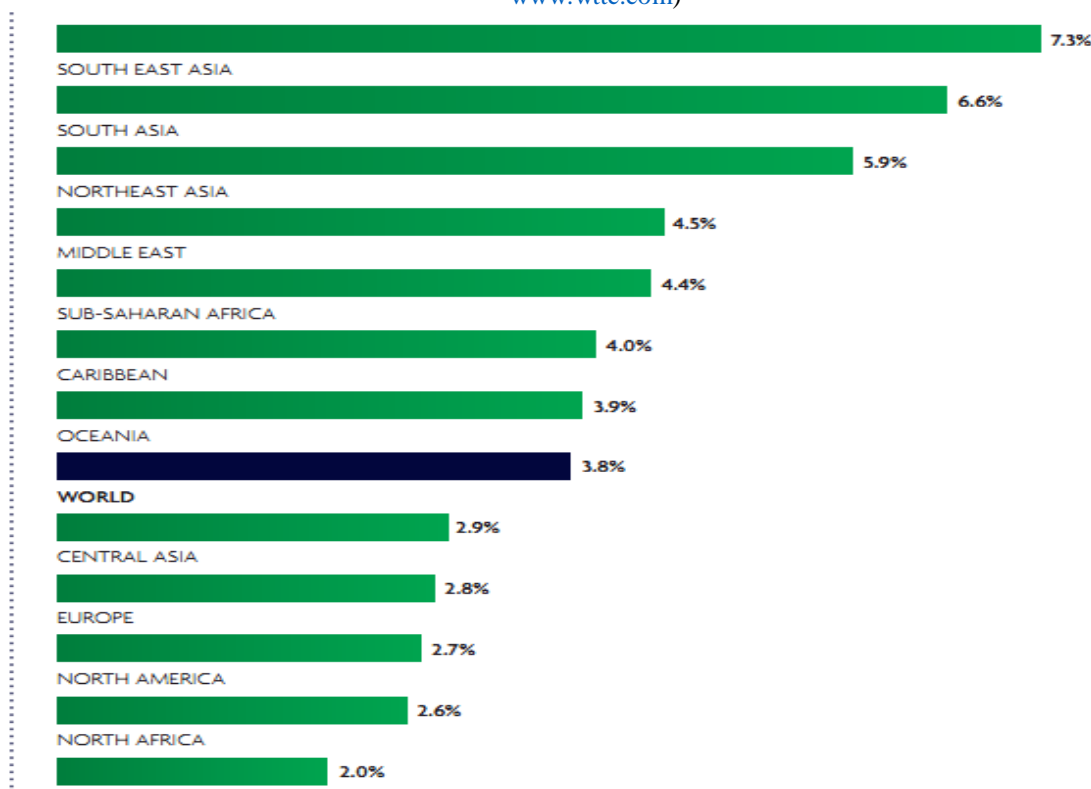
Moreover, with the ease on usage of the internet, planning a travel had become one of the top reasons why people used the internet for. In a 2007 study that was conducted by Dutton & Helsper, they founded out that the most searching activity done online was for planning a travel.

E-Tourism makes use of ICT functions as well as the internet by several tourism industries around the world to attract more tourist traffic and enhance their tourist experience. E-Tourism makes this easier, faster and convenient. While choosing next destination, tourist can recall information or idea from internal memory. If internal information is not enough, tourist will look for external information from friends, relatives, internet, brochures and etc. This information is very necessary while choosing a destination and planning ongoing activities during the trip such as travel mode, attractions, location activities and lodging. Following is given what factors will play main role while choosing destination.

Figure 2. Provisional 2023 data. 15000 + international tourists from 30+ markets and visiting a destination for the first time. TRAVELSAT benchmarking survey, 2011.
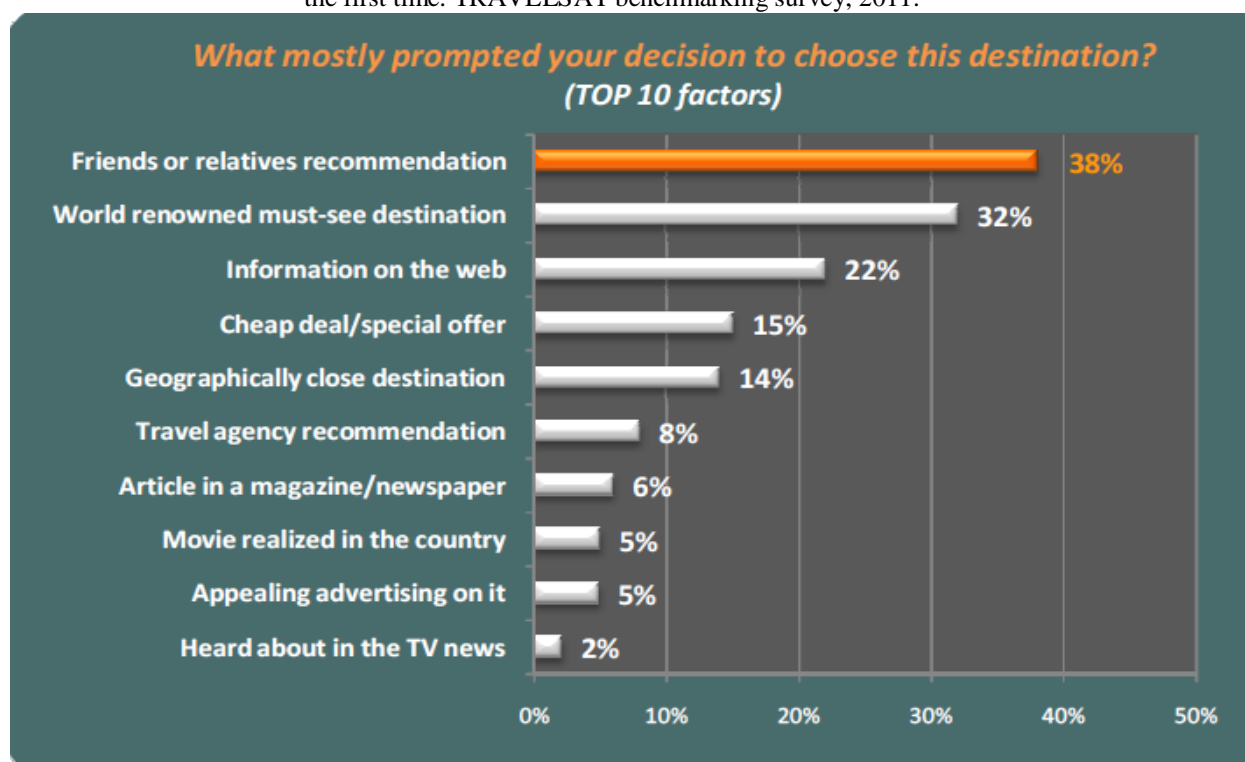
As it can be seen from Figure 1, Information on the web takes high position on decision making process of tourist, whereas old tradional ways of travel agency recommendation, newspaper takes less percentage among them. Because of technology, the travel industry can reach more people than it ever has before and as a result travelers are younger, better informed and more tech savvy. According to statistics by Statista, Vienna, there are around 60000 active travel related apps, which can conclude that current travelers prefer and use mobile application rather than other techniques of Tourism and Travel. Overal, 1 in 2 travelers used their smartphones to make bookings. According to GOOGLE research, 70 % of travelers with smartphone have done travel research on their mobile. It is clear that mobile can also be a great source to reach potential target. Moreover, official websites of tourism department, social websites and touristic blogs will efficiently effect to traveler's decision making while searching for next destination.

Blogging as a way of promotion is considered as a cheaper marketing activity than traditional advertising and many researchers have suggested that tourism blogs are new and non-traditional way to help define the image of a destination or activity. Moreover, it will effect to the mind of tourist, which tourist will consider blogger's advices or travel advisor websites (Doris Schmalleger and Dean Carson, 2020).

In the case of Uzbekistan, there are few numbers of blogs and promotions on trip advisory websites comparing to Thailand or Singapore. They don't encourage bloggers or tourist to write about their experience or suggestions how to improve tourism in the country. Uzbekistan Tourism agencies don't pay attention about online reviews or promotions which can be hardly seen their promotions on social blogs or travel advisory websites. The blogs created for Uzbekistan tourism are mostly outdated and tourist can hardly get idea and excitement to travel to the country. Moreover, most of posts written by bloggers are giving bad image about the both country, because of bad comments. Comments or reviews on trip advisory websites such as TripAdvisor.com or Lonelyplanet.com are very less or about bad experience in the country. These bad comments or expressions will give bad image about the country's tourism which will led to demotivation of tourist to visit the country. Potential tourists will have difficulty in getting information and ideas about tourist attraction places from blogger's or trip advisory websites while visiting to Uzbekistan In general, it is obvious that there is less e-word-of-mouth about both countries' tourist attraction places and activities. For example, there are less promotions or pop-up advertisements about Uzbekistan tourism on Lonelyplanet.com or Tripadvisor.com, comparing to other developing countries such as Singapore or Malaysia. Because of the factors which were mentioned above, travel lovers don't know much or don't have any idea about Uzbekistan.

An example of country in ASEAN that provides ticket booking in their tourism and travel website is Indonesia. When a visitor clicked the image linked, they will be directly refreshed to Garuda Airline. The replacement of the website tabs into that of the Garuda Airline was instantaneous, visitor do not have to open another tab on their browser. Again, this booking feature gave tourist/visitor an aspect of convenience.

In the case of Uzbekistan, while they provide information on hotels, they did not have booking systems in neither the Tourism Website nor the Uzbek Airlines website. The Uzbek Airline website have a flight booking however the page was not given the option for many language until the web browser prompt to translate it. The functionality on the other hand was not operational. For an Airline website that is not properly functioning does not only give bad reputation to potential tourist but this will cause them to undeniably go back to Travel Agencies just to book and buy ticket which will cause further delay and setback in tourist/visitors' planning activity.

Most of the international airlines such as Taiwan and Singapore airlines provide online-check-in services in order to fasten the travelling process. In the case of Uzbekistan, tourist cannot get this service, which can give bad image and experience to the potential tourist. Moreover, there are applications such as Flight Time in Malaysia airline which can alert and give information about flight or departure delay. It will be beneficial to the tourist because they do not have to go to the airport early and wait the flight in the airport. This service is not available in Uzbekistan, which tourists cannot get information about their flight details or delay. Besides that, if tourists go to airport, they will need a good internet facility in order to pass the time while waiting flight, but unfortunately Wi-Fi availability is very limited or sometimes not accessible in the Uzbek airports. Only 30 minutes of accessing Wi-Fi will be given to each tourist, which gives tremendous reputation not only about country airport but tourism also. In comparing with other developing countries such as Malaysia or Thailand, tourist will get unlimited access to Wi-Fi so tourist doesn't mind staying in airport. Moreover, if we look at tourism developed countries such as Malaysia and Thailand, there are many hotels and restaurants inside the airport, which is convenient to travelers for spending time while waiting or making transit. However, such kinds of facilities are not provided in main airports of Uzbekistan and tourist has to go out from airport and look for hotels, which may take time and effort. Restaurants and cafes are not well developed and designed comparing with foreign airports. For example, Singapore's Changi airport are considered one of the best, busiest and convenient airport in the world, where tourist can spend whole day with fun and entertainment. There are 80 restaurants, bars, fast food options, movie theatres, multiple spas.

Electronic booking and Payment Systems include applications that integrate transport, tourism and other services (health-care, administrative certificates, etc.). Smart cards, for example, represent an easy and cheap tool providing different services, like easy convenient pay (museums, theatres, restaurants, telephone, hotels, parking, public transport, etc.), integrated ticketing (same card for different public transport) and real time service monitoring (parking availability, etc.)

In Uzbekistan, taxi and bus are available but during payment tourist will face problems such as paying ticket by master card or booking taxi. Paying by master or visa card will not be accepted in many places such as restaurants, hotels, taxi and buses where tourist can only pay by cash. It will create another problem for tourism, which need to exchange or withdraw money from master card in order to make payment.

Uzbekistan Tourism officials should keep updated their social website pages such as Facebook, Youtube, and Instagram every day. They should make social website pages more active with daily promotions and activities by taking an example or do collaboration with tourism developed countries such as Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and Indonesia. It will be great, if ASEAN countries and Uzbekistan make joint-promotion or travel exchange experience with each other. It will develop tourism industry in the country and make awareness about tourism potential of country to the world. Moreover, tourism officials should control the format and language of posts in the social pages, write posts mostly in commonly used languages such as English, Chinese or Russian instead of local languages. As a result, tourist can easily get idea or motivation about Uzbekistan tourism.

In addition, demand for leisure travel by Muslims is increasing in parallel with the expanding Muslim population worldwide. Islamic Tourism is used for travelers who want to accomplish religious observances or leisure voyage in countries where Islamic religious rules needs to be considered such as halal or Muslim-friendly tourism. Uzbekistan is known and considered as Muslim country, where great Islamic philosophers such as Imom Al-Buxoriy, At-Termiziy, Naqshbandiy were born. However, from my personal practice, I can say that minority of people in the world knows where Al-Buxoriy was born. In addition, majority of Muslims are currently in Asia-Pacific region with number of 986,420,000 people in 2010. In detail, Indonesia has highest number of Muslims. Islamic tourism in Asia-Pacific region is well developed and appreciated by many Muslim countries. For example, Halal Local app in Indonesia helps Muslim travelers to find Halal food and restaurants, mosque, prayer spaces in the country. Moreover, tourist can book hotel or restaurants by looking at menu and request halal foods to be served. There are around 40,000 listing of halal restaurants, hotels and homestays. Unfortunately, Islamic Tourism

is not well developed in Uzbekistan. There are less halal restaurants and pray rooms in main touristic destinations. However, we have high capability to develop Islamic Tourism in our country.

In order to solve drawbacks which were given above Uzbekistan Tourism authority need to do some improvement and changes in this sector. There are some recommendations:

1. **Invite more bloggers, famous sport, movie stars and encourage them to write and post about country's tourism.**

    It is suggested that Uzbekistan should invite international, local bloggers, famous sport and movie stars to visit tourism destinations for free of charge and encourage them to write about it. If bloggers in websites such as Tripadvisor.com, Lovelyplanet.com write about country's tourism potential, people who follow them can get idea or be aware about the country. Tourism officials should sponsor famous TV Channel reporters or members to visit the country and make a report about tourism capability of country. It can increase tourist flow to the country in a short time.

2. **Implement competitions, contests on tourism ideas or destinations of Uzbekistan and provide prizes (financial or free tickets to travel around the country).**

    Tourism Authority should implement and create competitions, contests where winners can get financial prizes or chance to visit the country. This kind of e-marketing ideas are held by Thailand and Indonesia Tourism Authority. It is one type of advertising country's tourism, where people will get motivated to win the contest and visit the country for free. It is clear that winners will share and write about their trip to Uzbekistan, which can increase e-word-of-mouth. Other way around, it can be another contests, when Authority encourage travelers to post one of the best photos which were taken in Uzbekistan with hashtags and posts such as: "#BestUzbekistan", "#VisitUzbekistan", "#MyUzbekistan", #BeautyofUzbekistan"

3. **Create VR Showrooms and make more developed exhibitions.**

    In other way around, Uzbekistan can showcase their tourism facilities and activities in foreign countries by creating and opening "Tourism Show Rooms". This kind of exhibitions can be held in crowded place: such as in big supermarkets, famous touristic destinations or in the main streets or avenues. Because, old way of advertising tourism (giving booklets, pictures or telling stories about country) is not accepted anymore. By showing actual touristic potential of country, tourist can get information and motivation to visit the country. It is suggested to use VR (Virtual Reality) rooms, where tourist can feel the touristic destinations little bit by watching it on special tools. This kind of VR showrooms are boosted by Singapore Tourism authority in Brunei Darussalam.

4. **Encourage programmers to create more touristic apps which can be beneficial in Uzbekistan and make development in main airports.**

    Uzbekistan tourism official should create application such as Time Flight in order to increase purchase facilitation while tourist is staying in the country's airport. Moreover, it would be beneficial if countries' airport is designed with comfortable flows of departure, where tourist can stay over in the airport and get all the comfort such as free coffee and Wi-Fi while waiting the flight departure. Tourism Authority should create major facilitations of travelers as opening hotels, motels, change design and add more creativity to airport, increase accessibility of Wi-Fi to unlimited version. In addition, Uzbek airline should provide online-check-in for passengers which can shorten the check-in procedures and provide good customer experience. Moreover, it would be beneficial and devote attention if Uzbek airline provide discounts, packages for loyal customers or new travelers. For example, In ASEAN countries such as Malaysia, Thailand, Brunei (Thai Airways, Royal Brunei Airline, AirAsia) airlines provide discounts, packages every month for travelers such as cutting in price of tickets, upgrading class, giving additional points, holiday packages or sometimes even providing hotels in arriving destination. Uzbek Airline should implement these strategies to their marketing plan and promote country's tourism.

5. **Implement new technologies to main tourism destinations such as museums, hotels, restaurants, cafes (QR code system).**

    Tourism website should provide a booking system for their site. The booking facilities would include booking for flight, hotel, and activities. The transaction for the booking should be secured as well as so not to make the visitor/ tourist be wary and doubtful. What they should do in collaboration with that is to provide and trust worthy alliance and partner to ease at least any doubt visitor will have. Hotels, restaurants, transports can use

QR code system, where tourist doesn't need to exchange money or carry cash in order to make transaction. They can just easily scan using phone and pay the money. It can economize time and make comfort for any travelers.

6. Major Tourism websites should update daily events and news, promote new competitions or prizes.

Make use of the Tourism website as a way to advertise whatever is going on in the country such as events no matter small they are. For example, featuring a local marathon, sport events or big national, tradional holidays inside the website as a "what's happening now". Tourism does not mean just advertisement for "tourist spots" available, it is also showing and promoting the country as a whole.

7. Start using e-visa system, create more money exchange kiosk.

Moreover, it will be great if Uzbekistan start using e-visa system, which can make comfortable to plan trips for tourists without any distraction. In order to solve money circulation among the countries, there should be many money exchange kiosks in touristic destinations. Instead of visiting banks, tourist can easily exchange currency in booths.

8. Develop Islamic tourism apps, facilitations and opportunities.

It is advised that in order to develop Islamic tourism in the country, Uzbekistan Tourism authority should implement and build pray rooms in main destinations, create more halal food restaurants, hotels where it is prohibited to drink alcohol or eat non-halal foods. Moreover, there should be mobile applications or websites which can share information about location of mosques, pray rooms or halal restaurants, hotels. It would be convenient to traveler who comes to the country for pilgrim or religious purpose. Uzbekistan should advertise Islamic tourism as well, which can encourage many Muslim travelers to visit the country.

In conclusion, drawbacks which were mentioned above in this chapter affect adversely to the development of e-tourism in Uzbekistan. It would be great if Uzbekistan Tourist authority implement e-tourism policy in tourism sector and train all members of this field in technology advanced system. ASEAN member country's tourism development should be learned and implemented in our country, which would be beneficial for both sides: tourism and private sector. Number of potential visiting travelers to Uzbekistan will increase rapidly if tourism cooperates with technology. On the other hand, travelers can feel comfortable and enhancement while visiting our land, after practicing mobility and development in Uzbekistan Tourism.

9. Setting automatic bio-lavaratories in cities and districts

These types of conveniences are used by several nations in the world. The upside of them is that people do not need to clean as they clean themselves. Since people are not involved, these lavaratories could be installed anywhere. In doing so, services for tourists in our nation will be of higher quality.

10. Formulating inexpensive intercity taxi system.

This allows tourists to travel in a cheap way. We can see some examples of these in European countries, such as BLA BLA CAP. This system works in the following manner: ordinary people having the same direction help passengers by taking them to their address if it is profitable for them. These ordinary people may be doctors, programmers, farmers etc.

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