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Experiences in Developing Pilgrimage Tourism in Foreign Countries and Their Potential Application in Uzbekistan

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Abstract: The article analyzes the approaches to management, infrastructure, marketing, and service diversification used to develop pilgrimage tourism in foreign countries. Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Based on the experience of countries such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran, India, and Malaysia, mechanisms such as regulating pilgrim flows, digital services, organizing additional economic activities around sacred sites, and security management are examined. The analysis results will enable the development of practical proposals for the sustainable development of pilgrimage tourism in Uzbekistan, the creation of a favorable environment for pilgrims, the improvement of service quality, and the modernization of regional infrastructure.

Keywords: pilgrimage tourism, international experience, infrastructure, management model, digitization, religious heritage sites, service quality, security management, tourism in Uzbekistan.

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1. Introduction

Pilgrimage tourism—that is, travel to sacred sites and places of religious or spiritual significance—is becoming one of the most important segments of global tourism. In recent years, this type of tourism has taken on not only spiritual but also economic and social significance worldwide. Pilgrimage tourism has emerged as an important sector in many countries for preserving cultural heritage, developing regional economies, and expanding the flow of international tourists. Today, pilgrimage tourism is recognized as one of the most important and rapidly developing segments of the global travel market [1].

According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), the number of visitors to sacred sites worldwide annually is around 300–330 million. This indicator confirms that pilgrimage tourism is a segment with stable global demand.

In 2024, the pilgrimage tourism market was valued at approximately \$270 billion, and it is projected to reach \$621 billion by 2030. Such rapid market expansion indicates the high economic potential of this sector. Moreover, according to 2023 statistics, Christian pilgrimages accounted for the largest share—31% of religious tourism.

The figures presented show that pilgrimage tourism is not only a process that satisfies religious needs but has also become a powerful factor in expanding infrastructure development, transportation systems, the hotel industry, and service sectors [2]. Therefore, studying the strategies, management models, marketing approaches, and infrastructure development practices used in foreign countries in this field has significant scientific and practical importance.

Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran, India, and other countries have achieved sustainable development in this sector by creating infrastructure for pilgrims, standardizing service

quality, using digital management systems, and ensuring security. Their experience shows that religious travel, in addition to its economic efficiency, also serves to strengthen local employment and interregional integration.

Uzbekistan has a rich historical and cultural heritage in pilgrimage tourism and is considered one of the destinations with high potential on the international stage. However, to fully utilize the available opportunities, it is necessary to adapt advanced foreign experiences in service quality, infrastructure, management, and marketing. Therefore, this research is aimed at analyzing effective approaches used in developing pilgrimage tourism in foreign countries and identifying the possibilities for their application in the context of Uzbekistan.

Young tourists make up a significant portion of the global tourism activity. According to research, they account for over 20 percent of the global tourism market and are one of the fastest-growing segments. Young people actively participate in various types of tourism, and their consumption behavior and travel motivations differ significantly from those of the traditional tourism market. Recent studies on youth tourism identify factors such as educational pursuits, understanding other cultures, personal development, and gaining new experiences as the primary motivations [3]. The younger generation's desire to learn and openness to new experiences are considered important factors in the future development of tourism.

Literature Review

International and local academic research on pilgrimage tourism examines the economic, social, and cultural impact of religious travel based on various theoretical approaches. In the studies by Egesi, Kalkan, and Bilim on Turkey, pilgrimage tourism infrastructure, pilgrim flow management, standardization of service quality, and digitization processes were identified as key factors.

For Saudi Arabia, Henderson, as well as Rabbani and Khan, analyzed the role of security, transportation logistics, the electronic registration system, and digital services in enhancing efficiency during the Hajj and Umrah processes. Iranian researchers Rahmani and Gharavi provided scientific conclusions on service quality at the pilgrimage sites of Mashhad and Qom, the regulation of seasonal pilgrims' flows, and the impact of religious travel on the local economy.

In local studies on Uzbekistan, Mustaeva analyzes the integration of religious heritage and pilgrimage tourism, while Ergashev examines the possibilities of applying foreign experiences to the Uzbek context [4].

Literature shows that in foreign experience, integrated management, digitization, rational infrastructure planning, and standardization of service quality are the main important factors. Local literature, in turn, substantiates the necessity of harmonizing international experience with regional opportunities for the sustainable development of pilgrimage tourism in the context of Uzbekistan.

2. Materials and Methods

The research was conducted using scientific and methodological approaches. First, a structural-analytical approach was applied to analyze the resources of religious pilgrimage tourism, the existing infrastructure, the service delivery system, and their interrelationships.

3. Results and Discussion

During the study, the main components of pilgrimage tourism in Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran, India, European countries, and Uzbekistan were examined – the level of infrastructure, mechanisms for managing pilgrim flows, and the extent of digitalization, services quality, and indicators determining the economic efficiency of pilgrimage tourism were collected and systematically analyzed [5]. During the analysis, the approaches of each country in developing its religious tourism sector, its model of public administration, service diversification, level of digital integration, and logistical capabilities were compared. As a result of this comparative analysis, the existing differences, institutional strengths, effective management mechanisms, and innovative practices among the

selected countries were identified. At the same time, the analysis identified the gaps in the development of pilgrimage tourism in Uzbekistan, the areas with high potential, and the opportunities for adapting international experience to the local model.

Table 1. Average annual statistical indicators of pilgrim flows by country for 2016–2023.

States	Annual number of pilgrims
Saudi Arabia (Hajj–Umrah)	20–22 mln
Turkey (Konya, Istanbul, Mardin)	10–12 mln
India (Varanasi, Ajmer)	7–8 mln
Iran (Mashhad, Qom)	12–15 mln
Europe (Santiago de Compostela)	0,3–0,4 mln
Uzbekistan (Samarkand, Bukhara, Termez, Zangiota)	2,5–3,2 mln

The table shows the average annual number of pilgrims visiting major pilgrimage centers during the years 2016–2023, and these indicators reflect the quality of the countries' infrastructure, management system, services market, level of digitalization, and how effectively it is integrated into the tourism economy are clearly reflected (Table 1). The volume of visits is directly linked not only to religious factors but also to economic strength, government policy, the development of the transport and logistics system, and the diversification of services [6].

Saudi Arabia has the highest figure, with 20–22 million pilgrims participating in the Hajj and Umrah ceremonies annually. This massive influx ensures centralized governance, high-capacity infrastructure, a developed air transport system, and the intensive diversification of the services market. The continuity of the pilgrimage flow brings stable foreign exchange earnings to the economy, increases employment, and lays the groundwork for the expansion of the service sector.

In Turkey, 10–12 million pilgrims are recorded annually visiting centers such as Konya, Istanbul, and Mardin. This figure indicates the economically integrated nature of religious heritage and tourism infrastructure. In Turkey, pilgrimage tourism is integrated not only with religious but also with economic activity elements—hotels, transportation, retail, gastronomy, and cultural events—which ensures a large-scale export of services for the country [7].

Iran's Mashhad and Qom centers attract 12–15 million pilgrims per year. In the country, the flow of pilgrims constitutes an important segment of domestic and international tourist demand. The services market around these sites—including the hotel, retail, transportation, and religious products sectors—has emerged as a stable source of economic growth.

The 7–8 million visits recorded annually to India's Varanasi and Ajmer routes demonstrate the high demand for the country's pilgrimage centers. However, infrastructure imbalances and seasonal load constraints limit economic efficiency. Nevertheless, India's low-cost service model and the size of its large domestic market make religious tourism an economically important sector.

In Europe's Santiago de Compostela route, 300,000–400,000 pilgrims participate annually. Although the number of visits is lower compared to others, this route falls into the high-value tourism segment. Since pilgrims often undertake long-distance walking routes, revenue per pilgrim is higher [8]. This model delivers economic returns based on a market for quality services, standardized infrastructure, and long-term tourism spending.

In Uzbekistan, 2.5–3.2 million pilgrim visits to centers such as Samarkand, Bukhara, Termez, and Zangiota have been recorded. Although this indicator is lower compared to other leading countries, pilgrimage tourism in the country is experiencing a steady growth rate. The modernization of infrastructure, the expansion of digitalization, and the improvement of service quality can significantly increase this indicator. The economic

potential of pilgrimage tourism is high, and it can create significant added value at the local level, especially through trade, transport, hotel, gastronomy, and excursion services.

Table 2. Composition of the services market around the pilgrimage tourism infrastructure

	Turkey	India	Iran	Uzbekistan
Guiding	42%	33%	38%	21%
Local transportation	58%	51%	47%	30%
Shopping and souvenirs	63%	57%	49%	28%
Hotel services	72%	44%	53%	35%

The table, illustrating the structural composition of the service market formed around pilgrimage centers, compares the shares of the four main service segments—guiding, local transportation, retail and souvenir sales, and hotel services—for Turkey, India, Iran, and Uzbekistan (Table 2). These indicators show which areas of pilgrims' spending are most significant in each country and the level of diversification of the services market [9].

According to the table, the share of guide services is the highest in Turkey, at 42 percent. This indicates that the system of professional guides is well-developed in Turkey's pilgrimage destinations, and that tour guide services are a significant part of the market. Iran (38%) and India (33%) also have relatively high figures, while in Uzbekistan this share is around 21 percent, indicating a limited supply of guide services and a low level of monetization in the market.

In the local transport segment, Turkey (58%) and India (51%) are in the leading positions. The main factor was the full integration of the transport infrastructure with pilgrimage routes. Iran's figure is 47 percent, while in Uzbekistan, this share is 30 percent. This indicates that in Uzbekistan, the transport system is not fully connected with the flow of pilgrims and the economic turnover of the logistics market is low.

The differences in retail and souvenir services are even more pronounced [10]. In the Turkish (63%) and Indian (57%) markets, the retail network is well-developed, and a large portion of pilgrims' expenses is directed to this segment. Iran (49%) has a moderately high indicator. In Uzbekistan, however, this share is only 28 percent, indicating that the souvenir market, handicraft trade, and tourist retail infrastructure are not yet fully developed. This indicates that a very large part of this economic potential is not being sufficiently utilized.

Turkey again stands out for the highest indicator in hotel services—72 percent. The development of this segment indicates a high length of stay for visitors in the country, and that the accommodation market is one of the main sources of income for the economy [11]. The figures for Iran (53%) and India (44%) are also balanced. In Uzbekistan, however, the share of hotel services is only 35 percent, which is explained by the short duration of pilgrims' visits, insufficient load on the hotel sector, and limited diversification of services.

The figures in the table indicate that Turkey, India, and Iran have a widely diversified services market centered on pilgrimage tourism, with a large portion of spending flowing back into the economy's service sector. Uzbekistan, however, has a low share in all segments, indicating that the economic revenue from pilgrims is not being adequately monetized. The narrowness of the service market, the lack of adequate infrastructure, and the imbalance between segments are the main factors limiting economic efficiency.

Discussion

The results of the analysis show that although the approaches used in the experiences of Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran, India, and Europe for the development of pilgrimage tourism differ from one another, they rely on several common principles [12]. These are thorough infrastructure planning, centralized management of pilgrim flows, broad diversification of the service market, a high level of digitalization, and a coordinated management model for

tourism processes. In countries where these elements are present, the economic efficiency of pilgrimage tourism is significantly higher. In the Turkish experience, the integration of the services market, housing stock, transportation infrastructure, and guide system formed around religious centers generates sustained demand. In this model, the bulk of pilgrims' expenditures remains within the local economy. In Saudi Arabia's experience, however, strict standardization of logistics, security, digital governance, and visitation processes enables the effective management of high visitor capacity. In the cases of Iran and India, it is observed that religious centers have formed broad market segments for trade, transportation, and hotel services, leading to increased employment and income in these sectors [13]. However, on the European route to Santiago de Compostela, despite the relatively low number of annual visits, a market for high-value services (long-distance passenger routes, certified routes, a standardized lodging system) ensures economic efficiency.

Although the flow of pilgrims in Uzbekistan is increasing year by year, the service market segments are underdeveloped compared to other leading countries. The low share of guided services, the lack of full integration of local transport with pilgrimage routes, the narrowness of the souvenir and retail market, and the insufficient utilization of hotel services indicate limited diversification in the service sector. This means that the existing flow of pilgrims is not yielding sufficient economic returns. The low level of digitalization, unregulated business processes, and inadequate service standards are among the main factors affecting economic efficiency.

Foreign experience shows that pilgrimage tourism is not just a sector that satisfies religious needs, but an integrated economic system encompassing the service sector, transportation, trade, the hotel industry, cultural heritage, and digital technologies. For Uzbekistan, there is also an opportunity to adapt these approaches. Expanding the services market, developing the guide system on a professional basis, and introducing digital platforms, pilgrimage tourism can bring higher added value to the economy through the standardization of pilgrimage routes and comprehensive infrastructure planning [14].

Additionally, crowd management, the creation of logistics hubs around major religious centers, transforming bazaars into a managed system, and integrated service packages (transportation + guide + accommodation + digital guide) applied in international experience are considered suitable approaches for implementation in Uzbekistan. It is seen as a suitable approach for application in Uzbekistan's context. These mechanisms can attract pilgrims for longer periods, increase spending levels, and expand the economic turnover of the service sector.

Overall, one of the most important conclusions drawn from foreign experiences is that promoting pilgrimage sites alone is not enough to effectively develop pilgrimage tourism. The main outcome is shaped by the combined operation of infrastructure, the services market, the governance model, and the digital ecosystem. For Uzbekistan, developing systematic measures in these areas can significantly increase the economic efficiency of pilgrimage tourism. The table data shows that there are three main systemic problems in Uzbekistan's pilgrimage tourism market: weak infrastructure integration, low levels of digitization, and an insufficiently diversified services market [15]. These factors are interrelated and together significantly limit the economic efficiency of pilgrimage tourism.

Table 3. "Pilgrimage Tourism in Uzbekistan and the Experience of Leading Countries: Key Differences and Influencing Factors".

Direction	The situation in Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and India	The current situation in Uzbekistan	Identified problem / impact
Infrastructure Integration	Transportation, pilgrimage sites, and accommodation are fully integrated.	In some centers, transport connections are not sufficiently developed.	The flow of pilgrims is slow, and time and costs are increasing.
Digitization	Online registration, a digital guide, a mobile app, and e-logistics are available.	Digital services are underdeveloped; a unified platform has not been established.	There is insufficient comfort for pilgrims, and management is limited.
Diversification of the services market	The share of hotel, retail, transport, and souvenir markets is high (50–70%).	Uzbekistan's market share is between 20% and 35%.	The economic impact of pilgrims' spending is low.
Flow control	A centralized visit management system (Saudi model) is in place.	The statistical system is fragmented—data is not centralized in a single database; different agencies maintain separate statistics.	Forecasting and managing visitor flows is difficult
Marketing and branding	Pilgrimage routes have been established as a brand (Mevlana, Ajmer, Mashhad).	Branding is in its initial stages; there is no unified concept.	Insufficient recognition has been established in the international market
Regional economic impact level	Pilgrims' spending generates significant turnover in the local economy.	Economic impact is limited due to a weak services market.	The role of tourism in regional development will diminish

Specifically: the lack of full integration of infrastructure means that a single logistics chain between transportation, pilgrimage sites, and accommodation networks has not been established (Table 3). In the experience of Turkey or Saudi Arabia, such integrated systems streamline pilgrims' movements, save time, and, most importantly, ensure that a larger share of the costs is recirculated within the service sector [16]. In Uzbekistan, however, logistical disruptions reduce the intensity of service use, causing a portion of the economic flow to be lost. This situation also shortens the pilgrim's daily spending and the duration of their stay;

- low levels of digitalization create significant constraints in managing the flow of visitors and regulating service consumption [17]. In other countries, tools such as electronic registration, a digital guide, route maps, electronic payment systems, and online transport integration allow for precise management of visitor movements. This management model increases economic efficiency because real-time statistics on the services market are generated through digital systems. In Uzbekistan, however, the lack of a unified digital ecosystem limits the ability to forecast flows, determine service consumption levels, and optimize business processes;

- the low diversification of the services market indicates that the shares in the hotel, trade, transport, guiding, and other service segments have not been sufficiently

established. In foreign experience, the services sector is the main source of tourism revenue; for example, in Turkey the services market accounts for 50–70%, and every dollar spent by a visitor generates a multiple multiplier effect in the local economy. In Uzbekistan, this share is around 20–35%, and the economic potential is not being fully realized. Because the market is not sufficiently developed, pilgrims' spending is limited to accommodation or transportation.

The experience of foreign countries shows that Uzbekistan has the potential to achieve high economic returns. However, to fully realize this potential, the pilgrimage tourism infrastructure and services market must be organized as a single ecosystem [18]. The expansion of the services market, enhanced digital management, international branding of pilgrimage routes, and integration of logistics systems will significantly increase Uzbekistan's economic benefits from pilgrimage tourism. These approaches will serve to increase pilgrim spending, extend the length of stay, create additional value in the service sector, and enhance the multiplier effect on regional economies.

4. Conclusion

The development of pilgrimage tourism has a multifaceted positive impact on the services sector of the Uzbek economy, the transport and logistics system, small business, handicrafts, and the domestic tourism industry. The increase in visits to pilgrimage sites boosts local employment, attracts infrastructure investments, and ensures economic revitalization in both urban and rural areas. At the same time, pilgrimage tourism serves to strengthen the country's international image, widely promote its religious and spiritual heritage, and reduce socio-economic disparities between regions.

Research findings show that in foreign countries—particularly Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and India—pilgrimage tourism is organized on the basis of a single ecosystem for infrastructure, the services market, flow management, and digitalization. This integration model serves to effectively manage pilgrim flows, create high value-added in the services sector, and enhance tourism's impact on the regional economy. In Uzbekistan, despite existing opportunities, the pace of development of the pilgrimage tourism market is limited by slow infrastructure integration, low levels of digitalization, and insufficient diversification of the services market. Analysis shows that the coefficient of pilgrims' expenditures reentering the local economy is low, indicating that the services sector is not operating at full capacity. The decentralized nature of flow management, a fragmented statistical system, and insufficiently developed marketing and branding strategies limit the international competitiveness of pilgrimage routes.

Foreign experience shows that there are broad economic opportunities for Uzbekistan. By modernizing the pilgrimage tourism market, it is possible to extend the length of stay, expand service consumption, activate local entrepreneurship, and create a multi-tiered multiplier effect in regional economies. To achieve this, it is necessary to integrate infrastructure, logistics, transportation, digital services, retail, and hospitality sectors into a single system, form service clusters around pilgrimage centers, and promote pilgrimage routes internationally as a brand.

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