



## **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 shows that sport tourism is a crucial factor in economic diversification, aiding job creation, regional development and the growth of small and medium businesses. The different international competitions such as boxing or judo championships raise the country's status globally and also contribute to strengthening its strength and cultural interaction. Because of different reforms and because more people are now interested in active travel, tourism in Uzbekistan has recovered after the pandemic. However, scientists still have not studied enough how sport affects the economy of the country and small businesses. Overall, the results indicate that sport tourism is very important for the development of Uzbekistan. It can help the country to 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 (Kuchkarova, 2023). Passive tourism is when visitors attend big venue events like the Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cup. Active tourism is defined as visitors participating in events like hiking, cycling, and/or mountain climbing, which is becoming increasingly popular. Adding to the variety that sports tourism encompasses, it is becoming part of a larger trend of active tourism that is gaining quick popularity and recognition from the UNWTO and the International Olympic Committee (SHARE Research Document, 2023). In 2023, sports tourism was economically valued at 609 billion USD, and is expected to experience 16% growth in 2024-2030, which is an indicator of the impact sports tourism will have on economic growth and social development across the globe (UNWTO, 2024).

After the pandemic, there was an increase in interest in sport and active travel 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 investments, infrastructure improvement, collaboration with the cultural and creative industries, and the upliftment of local communities and small businesses (SHARE Research Document, 2023).

Uzbekistan has the possibility to become a world-class sports tourism destination. State protected sites alone number over 8,210 (National Statistics Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2022) and many sites are included in the UNESCO list. Tourism in Uzbekistan is a relatively new sector, and has experienced rapid growth in the past few years. Improvements in the visa policy and the liberalization of the visa over 90 countries in 2023 has led to an explosive growth in the number of tourists.

Uzbekistan has supported the growing tourism sector with an impressive building boom that has enhanced travel services, improved lodging options, and bolstered the number of trained personnel available to serve tourists. Built in the pattern of other nations, sports tourism will be an excellent and enjoyable way to expand Uzbekistan's tourism, while at the same time, an important feature of expanding and improving Uzbekistan's tourism to reach 20 million foreign tourists in 2040 (Usmanova et.al., 2025; Tourism Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2025). Sports and outdoor activities such as hiking and cycling, as well as water sports are available for tourists to participate in and enjoy. The rapid growth of tourism in Uzbekistan has led to the development of the following research questions for this study:

- 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 as a powerful vehicle to economic development and growth of nations particularly for 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 that will provide more chances for economic diversification in Uzbekistan. According to the findings of the Institute of Macroeconomic and Regional Studies (IMRS), the establishment and facilitation of services related to tourism, as well as sports, have positively influenced the economy and contributed to its development. This signal increases across 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 (IMRS, 2024).

The Judo Championship, boxing tournament and a football cup held in Uzbekistan are some ways to advertise around the world and provide new opportunities for cooperation (Messner, 2026). However, the tourism industry experienced a serious adversity during the pandemic in terms of decreased number of arrivals and event cancellations. Nevertheless, in post-pandemic Uzbekistan the recovery is due to government reforms, new investments and a high-profile sport tourism push. Existing research has clearly demonstrated that sport tourism generates rates of return for host communities in terms of economic prosperity, job creation, infrastructure growth and the expansion of soft power (Kutluay Tutar & Abdulkaloub, 2025; Desranleau, 2025). Though, there is scarce academic discussion between sport tourism vis-a-vis GDP, SME development and long term competitiveness, which remains a gap this study aims to fulfil.

### **2.1 Theoretical Framework**

This study is grounded in three theoretical perspectives:

1. Tourism-Led Growth Hypothesis (TLGH) (Balaguer, J., & Cantavella-Jordá, 2002), proposes that tourism development leads to economic growth through its positive effects on foreign exchange earnings, job generation and infrastructure investment. Regarding the impact of sport tourism on GDP growth in Uzbekistan The visitor spending associated with sport visits, employment created within hospitality and transport and the capital inflow for sports facilities.
2. According to the Soft Power Theory (J. Nye, 2004), countries do not simply earn a positive global reputation by using military force or pressuring the economy, but through cultural charm and global connectedness. Sport tourism therefore operates as an instrument of public diplomacy and international branding.
3. Destination Competitiveness Model (Ritchie and Crouch, 2011). Tourism competitiveness depends on core resources, supporting factors, destination management, and qualifying determinants.

Together, these theories provide a solid 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 sport tourism's economic impact, three significant research gaps remain. First, limited research examines sport tourism's contribution to GDP growth in Central Asian States (JICA Final Report, 2022; Astanakulov, & Sokhibova, 2025). Second, the relationship between international sporting events and SME development in emerging markets lacks empirical investigation (Wikarya et. al., 2022; Makhdachi & Cherkaoui, 2025). Third, few studies (Shahzad et. al., 2017; Zhang et. al., 2021; Charibpoor et. al., 2024) analyze the long-term sustainability of sport tourism-driven infrastructure investments in developing economies. This research addresses these gaps by providing empirical 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 2018-2025. Data were collected from: Official government/president publications and portals, Uzbekistan Tourism Committee statistics, analytical reports of the Institute of Macroeconomic and Regional Studies, National Statistics Committees, World Travel & Travel Council, Report of International organizations of UN, FIFA, FIDE, IJF, IBA and Brand Value Index and 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, an analysis of trends in tourist arrivals and tourism revenues (2018-2025) was conducted. Second, tourism's contribution to GDP was calculated using comparative analysis. Third, a content analysis of government policy documents was conducted. Finally, descriptive statistics were applied to identify patterns and growth trajectories.

#### **3.2 Study Period Rationale**

The chosen study period of 2018–2025 covers the different phases of the evolution of tourism in Uzbekistan. 2018 acts as a baseline period before any reforms in the tourism growth of the country. 2019 was the first year of the growth of tourism in Uzbekistan as a result of new changes in the visa policies and more international tourism promotion. 2020–2021 was the period of the global tourism disruption due to the Covid 19 Pandemic. 2022–2025 is the period of recovery and growth in Uzbekistan tourism as the country demonstrated the resumption of tourism and the increased support from the government to promote the development of tourism in the country.

#### **3.3 Limitations**

There are a number of limitations in the study that the readers of this study should take into consideration. The most obvious one is the dependency on secondary data. While this narrows the scope of study and the analysis that can be performed, it is worth noting that due to the temporal nature of data reporting, the official data records can sometimes be unreliable or have discrepancies. Another significant limitation is the data pertaining to the sports tourism as a sub-sector of the general tourism that is less available. In general, it is also important to mention that there is a remarkable absence of primary data from the stakeholders and tourism visitors, such as in methods of collecting survey primary data, a lack of secondary data and absence of primary data pertaining to the study of research tourism to exemplify the data.

### **4. Results and Discussion**

The study on the sports tourism in Uzbekistan over 2018–2025 demonstrates a visible growing trend in terms of the number of tourists arrival as well as their contribution to the economy of a new visa policy. The amount of countries the population has free visa access to travel grew from 9 to 90 and led to a substantial increase in international travellers (Usmanova et al., 2025) from approximately 2,7 million in new visa policy reached almost 8,6 millions of people for the year and first nine months of 2025, representing a 112.5% increase compared to the same period in 2024 (Tourism Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2025). This growth reflects the global community's interest in active tourism and serious government reforms.

Investing in infrastructure (hotels, hostels, sports facilities, and travel agencies) has grown quickly, creating jobs and encouraging small-medium enterprises to develop business activities (Usmanova et al., 2025). Such international events, like judo or boxing championships and football cups, have not only brought tourism revenues but also improved the country's reputation in 'soft power' terms (Nye, 2004; Wikarya et al., 2022; Gharibpoor et al., 2024; Messner, 2026).

The pandemic led to tourism and sports events being disrupted temporarily with cancellations, reduced arrivals. Post-pandemic, however, recovery has been strong due to government reforms and the strategic investments in sport tourism as well as increasing interest of the public in healthy and active lifestyle (Usmanova et al., 2025). Active tourism has even become more popular with increased number of tourists and makes use of Uzbekistan's natural variety-mountains, rivers, desert-and is centred around hiking, cycling, mountaineering and water sports.

Social and diplomatic gains Sports tourism has also brought social and diplomacy benefits. Moreover, international sports competitions have helped establish international cooperation, cultural exchange and formed a positive image for Uzbekistan as a safe and interesting country to visit (UN, 2024; Romadon et. al., 2025; The Government portal of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2026). This is in line with national goals, which aim to draw 20 million foreign tourists by 2040 and lift tourism's GDP share to 7% (Tourism Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan. 2026; Fox, 2026).

Despite these encouraging results, there are still several problems. There is a dearth of literature that directly links sports tourism to GDP growth, SMES 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 the economic and infrastructure development of the country but also to its international image and social aspects for local communities. By continuing to develop this sector strategically, Uzbekistan can consolidate its position in the global tourism market while contributing to broader economic and social objectives.

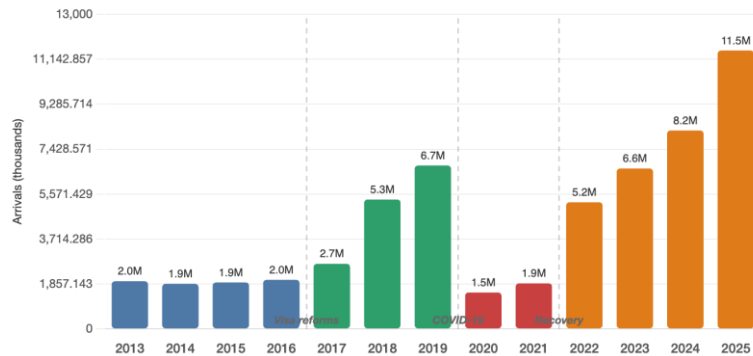


Figure 1. International Tourist Arrivals during 2013-2025.

- Pre-reform era (2013–2016)
- Reform & peak growth (2017–2019)
- COVID-19 contraction (2020–2021)
- Post-pandemic recovery (2022–2025)

Figure 1 reveals four distinct periods in Uzbekistan's tourism development. During pre-reform era (2013-2016), arrivals shows remained largely stagnant, hovering between 1.9 to 2.0 million, a plateau reflecting limited international promotion and restrictive visa regime. A decisive turning point came with the launch of visa liberalisation reform from 2017 onwards, which progressively expanded visa-free access from 9 to 90 countries. The impact was immediate and dramatic: 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 just three years. The pandemic period (2020-2021) caused a severe contraction, with arrivals plummeting to 1.5 million in 2020. Recovery began in 2021 but remained fragile at 1.9 million visitors. The post-pandemic recovery (2022-2025) demonstrates robust growth. By 2022, arrivals had recovered to 5.2 million (2019 levels). By end of 2025, an estimated 11.5 million international tourists visited Uzbekistan, representing a 73% increase over the 2019 pre-pandemic peak and cementing the country's position among the world's fastest-growing tourism destinations.

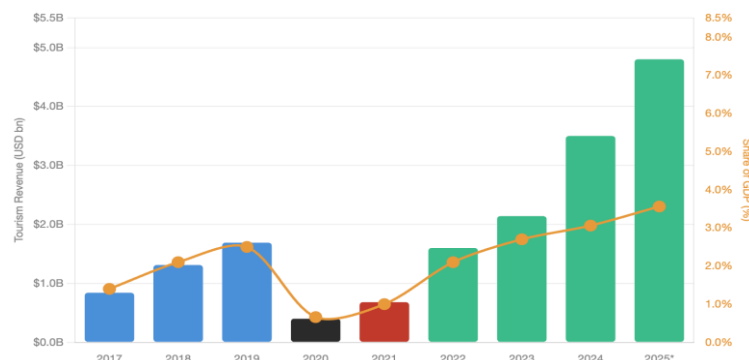


Figure 2. Tourism's Contribution to GDP in Uzbekistan (2017–2025).

- Tourism Share of GDP (%)
- Visa-reform expansion (2017–2019)
- COVID-19 contraction (2020–2021)
- Post-pandemic recovery (2022–2024)

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

Recovery phase from 2022 to 2025 has proven structurally transformative, rather than merely restorative. Tourism revenue surpassed its pre-pandemic peak in 2023, reaching \$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 setting the country firmly on track for its 2030 goal of a 7% GDP contribution. Preliminary estimates for 2025 indicate revenues surpassing \$4.8 billion, representing approximately 3.56% of an estimated \$135 billion GDP. These figures solidify tourism as one of Uzbekistan's primary growth drivers.

#### 4.1 Impact in various spheres:

In regard to the economic impact of visa liberalization, tourism arrivals jumped from 2.7 million (2017) to nearly 11.5 million, bringing in \$2 billion of revenue. Although the pandemic caused temporary halts, 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 (World Bank, 2020; World Travel & Tourism Council, 2024; National Statistics Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2025; World Travel & Tourism Council, 2025).

An International reputation enhancement is the estimation of value-added to the overall image of a country and its standing in the world by hosting and managing major sporting events. Well-planned and well-executed events signal to the world a solid political environment, good management, and cultural openness. In the world of perception, reputation, and image, the hosting of major events positively influences global media coverage, and this, in turn, positively impacts investment, tourism, and partnerships, creating a country out of isolation and into the international realm. According to the Brand Value report, Uzbekistan increased its national brand value and GDP in 2025, estimated at #55, due to confidence in its tourism, investment climate, and economic development (Brand Value Report, 2025). Hence, the organization of international sports events, such as judo and boxing championships and football tournaments, contributed to enhance the visibility and soft power of Uzbekistan. The country is now a well-known contemporary destination for cultural and active tourism.

Economic multipliers for sports events are in the range of 3-5x for lodging, food, transport, and retail spending (Tutron, 2024). Created around 12,000 direct jobs in sports venues and 35,000 indirect jobs in the hospitality industry (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2025). Encouraged growth for SMEs, with global tourism patterns confirming heightened need for activity and adventure travel providers. While general tourism statistics offer a backdrop, the sport-related tourism clearly shows different growth from the rest of the field. Here are the prominent sporting events that demonstrate progress in Uzbekistan:

- Tashkent has solidified its position as a prominent center for judo hub through a consistent series of prominent international competitions from 2022 to 2026. In 2022, the World Judo Championships were held for the first time ever in Central Asia, and the event brought 571 judokas from 82 countries spanning across 6 continents (International Judo Federation, 2022). Enhancing Uzbekistan's presence in the global sporting arena. This success was followed up by the 2023 Grand Slam, which saw the participation of 364 athletes from 49 countries (International Judo Federation, 2023). And the 2024 edition of the tournament continued the upward trend, with 495 judokas from 68 nations competing. In 2026 in Tashkent, 370 judokas from 40 countries participated in the championships (International Judo Federation, 2026). These related events have increasingly positioned Tashkent as the most popular judo event destination in Central Asia and a vibrant center for sport, business and arts.
- Uzbekistan's achievements have enabled its contrasting global positioning and economic growth via sporting events tourism. Uzbekistan's IBA Men's World Boxing Championship in Tashkent set a record prize pool of 5.2 million USD. 538 boxers from 107 countries participated (International Boxing Association, 2023) and the event improved the city's hospitality, transport, and retail sectors. Uzbekistan also excelled in the 2024 Paris Olympics, ranking 13th globally (Embassy of Uzbekistan in the US, 2024). Its national boxing team was top in the medal standings with 5 men's gold medals. With 6 gold medals, Uzbekistan's boxing team was also top at the 2025 World Boxing Championships (Majeed, 2025). Combining all of these achievements, Uzbekistan's boxing also inspired and aided the country with soft power and economic growth.
- As for achievements in other sports, Uzbekistan FIFA World Cup qualified for the first time in 2025 (FIFA, 2025) and the FIDE Chess World Cup 2025's winner was Javokhir Sindarov, who also won USD 120,000 (FIDE, 2025).

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

#### Infrastructure Development:

Improvement of the Olympic City in Tashkent exemplifies the rapid increase of professional sports infrastructure in the country. For the last three years, from 2022 to 2025, the development of Olympic City Tashkent has been complete. The complex spans about 100 hectares and includes a stadium, velodrome, aquatics place, training areas, other facilities to support athletes, paralympic dormitory and sport scientific-practical center (President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2025).

At the same time, mountain getaways like Amirsoy and Chingan in Tashkent region are being transformed into resorts that operate all year long, offering accommodations, aerial tramways, ski tracks, and recreational amenities. Zamin in Jizzakh region remains a popular spot for health and recovery, while the Charvak in Tashkent region is seeing extensive resort development aimed at mountain-lake tourism, relaxation, and sports services. These facilities are built to international standards, generating long-term capital investment for the city in terms of the implementation and modernization of city facilities and the development of tourism. Indeed, 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 has become an important driver of Uzbekistan's economic diversification, infrastructure modernization, and international recognition. Uzbekistan 2.0 has brought many positive changes in the liberalization of visa regimes, investments in sports-related infrastructure, and the hosting of global sports competitions. These changes, and others, have led to a significant increase in tourist arrivals, the development of small and medium enterprises (SMEs), and an increase in the country's soft power. With continuous investment, appropriate policies, and the right sustainable development approaches, Uzbekistan is likely to become the sports tourism destination of choice in Central Asia. Improved economic returns, coupled with Uzbekistan's 2040 development vision, will ensure that Sport tourism brings cultural exchanges, regional integration, and nation-building to the country.

The results of the study indicate that sport tourism in Uzbekistan will not only result in a sudden influx of tourists but will also bring about changes in the economy's structure and positive reputation over a longer period. Meanwhile, 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 the nation's progress. However, the study suggests that improved coordination, enhanced data collection, and more sustainable planning are necessary to fully capitalize on the lasting advantages of this sector. Precisely, there is a need to develop better institutional coordination as well as to improve statistical monitoring mechanisms. In the absence of a clear demarcation between sport tourism and general tourism data, the assessment of the ROI would be restricted to a certain extent. By bridging this gap through the implementation of more advanced data systems, providing professional training, and planning that is balanced regionally, Uzbekistan would be in a position to accurately measure its performance, lure in investment that is targeted and also to guarantee a sustainable growth of the sport tourism industry.

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