IMPROVING THE METHODS OF ENHANCING THE POTENTIAL OF TOURIST DESTINATIONS: EVIDENCE AND A STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK FROM UZBEKISTAN

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Abstract. *The potential of a tourist destination is the aggregate capacity of its natural, cultural, infrastructural, institutional and market resources to attract, serve and retain visitors while generating sustainable economic and social value. This article examines how the methods used to assess and enhance destination potential can be improved, using Uzbekistan as an instructive case of a rapidly emerging Silk-Road destination. Following the IMRAD structure, the study combines a review of foundational destination-competitiveness models (Porter; Crouch and Ritchie; Dwyer and Kim) with a quantitative analysis of open secondary data for 2017–2025 drawn from the national statistics authorities, UN Tourism, the World Economic Forum and the World Travel and Tourism Council. A mixed-methods design integrates trend analysis, a weighted composite-potential scoring matrix, a structured SWOT assessment and a target-gap analysis against the Uzbekistan-2030 Strategy. The results show that inbound demand recovered strongly after the pandemic and reached 11.7 million foreign visitors in 2025 (a 46.8% year-on-year increase), while tourism-services exports exceeded US$4.4 billion and the country climbed sixteen positions in the Travel and Tourism Development Index. Yet the composite assessment reveals that endowed resources substantially outpace created resources, supporting infrastructure and destination management. The article proposes an improved, multi-criteria methodology for enhancing destination potential built on digitalisation and smart-destination governance, product diversification, quality and human-capital upgrading, seasonality management and sustainability. The framework offers policymakers a replicable tool for prioritising interventions.*

Keywords: *tourist destination; destination potential; destination competitiveness; smart tourism; composite index; SWOT; Uzbekistan; Silk Road; sustainable tourism; destination management.*

1. Introduction

Tourism has become one of the most dynamic drivers of economic diversification, employment and regional development in the world economy. For emerging economies in particular, a well-managed destination can convert immobile cultural and natural assets into a tradable export, attract foreign exchange and stimulate a wide network of ancillary industries. The central object of tourism policy is therefore the **destination** — a geographically delimited space that visitors perceive as a single entity and that competes with other destinations for a share of discretionary demand. The strategic question for any destination is how to identify, measure and enhance its **potential**: the latent and realised capacity of its resource base to generate visitor flows and value over time.

Uzbekistan offers a particularly rich setting for studying destination potential. Located at the heart of the historical Silk Road, it possesses an exceptional concentration of world-class cultural heritage — the UNESCO-listed monumental ensembles of Samarkand, Bukhara and Khiva chief among them — together with diverse landscapes, a distinctive intangible heritage and a strategic position between the large markets of Asia and Europe. Since 2017, a wide-ranging programme of liberalisation (visa-free entry for citizens of more than ninety countries, simplified registration, deregulation of the tour-operating sector and large public investment) has transformed the operating environment. The measurable result has been extraordinary: after the pandemic trough, inbound flows rebounded to reach 11.7 million foreign visitors in 2025, an increase of 46.8% on the previous year, placing Uzbekistan among the seven fastest-growing inbound destinations in the world according to UN Tourism.

This rapid growth, however, sharpens rather than resolves the underlying policy problem. Growth driven largely by proximity markets and by the country's exceptional inherited resources is not the same as a structurally competitive, resilient and sustainable destination. Length of stay remains short, demand is highly seasonal and spatially concentrated in three or four historic cities, the mid-market accommodation stock and direct air connectivity remain thin, and the digital and experiential economy is still nascent. In other words, the **created resources**, **supporting factors** and **destination management** capacities that convert raw potential into durable competitiveness lag behind the country's endowment. Improving the very **methods** by which potential is assessed and enhanced is thus a question of both scholarly and practical importance.

The existing literature provides powerful conceptual models of destination competitiveness, but three gaps persist. First, the most influential frameworks are either strongly supply-side and largely qualitative, or so data-intensive that they are difficult to operationalise where statistical coverage is incomplete. Second, comparatively little peer-reviewed work applies these frameworks to Central Asian destinations using recent open data. Third, the methodological step from **diagnosis** (measuring potential) to **prescription** (prioritising interventions) is rarely made explicit and reproducible.

Against this background, the study pursues four objectives:

- to synthesise the principal theoretical models of destination potential and competitiveness and to distil their operational components;
- to analyse the recent dynamics, structure and supply-side conditions of Uzbekistan's tourism sector using open secondary data for 2017–2025;
- to demonstrate an improved, multi-criteria method for assessing destination potential that combines a weighted composite index, SWOT and target-gap analysis; and
- to translate the diagnosis into a prioritised set of methods for enhancing destination potential, benchmarked against the Uzbekistan-2030 Strategy.

The contribution of the paper is therefore methodological as much as empirical. It shows how open, freely available data can be assembled into a transparent decision-support instrument, and it illustrates the instrument on a fast-moving destination. The remainder of the article follows the IMRAD format: Section 2 reviews the literature; Section 3 sets out the materials and methods; Section 4 presents the results; Section 5 discusses their implications and proposes the improved framework; and Section 6 concludes.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The concept of destination potential and competitiveness

Destination potential is closely related to, but broader than, destination competitiveness. Competitiveness is usually defined as the ability of a destination to increase tourism expenditure, to attract visitors while providing them with satisfying and memorable experiences, and to do so profitably and sustainably, thereby enhancing the well-being of residents (Ritchie and Crouch, 2003). Potential extends this idea to the latent, not-yet-realised capacity embedded in a destination's resource base. A destination can possess high potential (rich endowments) yet low realised competitiveness if the mechanisms that mobilise those endowments — infrastructure, skills, governance and marketing — are weak. This distinction is central to the present study, because the policy task in Uzbekistan is precisely to close the gap between abundant potential and still-maturing competitiveness.

2.2 Foundational models

The intellectual foundations of the field lie in Porter's (1990) theory of the competitive advantage of nations, whose diamond of factor conditions, demand conditions, related and supporting industries, and firm strategy and rivalry was adapted to tourism by Crouch and Ritchie (1999). Their subsequent conceptual model (Ritchie and Crouch, 2003) organises destination competitiveness around core resources and attractors, supporting factors and resources, destination management, destination policy and planning, and qualifying and amplifying determinants, all embedded in a global (macro) and competitive (micro) environment. The model distinguishes **comparative advantage** (the resource endowment) from **competitive advantage** (the ability to deploy resources effectively) — a distinction that maps directly onto the potential-versus-realisation problem.

Dwyer and Kim (2003) built on this work to propose an **integrated model** that gives explicit weight to demand-side and situational conditions and, crucially, offers a battery of eighty-five measurable indicators grouped into six categories: endowed (inherited) resources, created resources, supporting factors and resources, destination management, demand conditions and situational conditions. Because it is operational and data-oriented, the integrated model is well suited to empirical benchmarking, and it underpins the composite assessment used later in this paper. Complementary contributions include Buhalis (2000) on strategic destination marketing, Enright and Newton (2004) on quantitative prioritisation of competitiveness attributes, Vengesayi (2003) on the interplay of competitiveness and attractiveness, Gooroochurn and Sugiyarto (2005) on composite competitiveness indicators, and Crouch (2011) on the relative importance of individual determinant attributes. More recently, Buhalis and Amaranggana (2015) reframed the agenda around **smart tourism destinations**, in which digital infrastructure and data-driven personalisation become primary sources of competitive advantage — a theme of direct relevance to Uzbekistan's modernisation. A comparison of the two most influential frameworks is summarised in Table 3.

Table 3. Comparison of two foundational destination-competitiveness models

Dimension	Ritchie & Crouch (2003)	Dwyer & Kim (2003)
Theoretical root	Porter's diamond; comparative vs. competitive advantage	Extends Crouch–Ritchie; integrates the demand side

Core building blocks	Core resources & attractors; supporting factors; destination management; policy & planning; qualifying determinants	Endowed & created resources; supporting factors; destination management; demand conditions; situational conditions
Orientation	Predominantly supply-side	Balanced supply- and demand-side
Measurement	Largely conceptual / qualitative	85 indicators across 6 groups; operational
Main strength	Rich strategic logic of management and policy	Empirically testable; supports benchmarking
Main limitation	Weak on demand and measurement	Data-intensive; sensitive to indicator weighting

Source: compiled by the authors from Ritchie & Crouch (2003) and Dwyer & Kim (2003).

2.3 Uzbek and regional scholarship

A growing body of Uzbek and Central Asian scholarship addresses the sector's development. Tukhliev and Abdullaeva (2015) analyse the prospects of specialised tourism in the country's mountainous regions; Pardaev and colleagues (2008) provide an early systematisation of the service, hospitality and tourism economy and its development problems; and Safarov (2016) offers a geographical treatment of the nation's tourism resources. More recent work examines historical-cultural tourism destinations and their territorial development and efficiency (Erkaeva, 2023), the theoretical and methodological foundations of the tourism-services market (Alieva, 2019), and the mobilisation of investment activity in the sector (Norchaev, 2018). Collectively, this literature documents the country's exceptional endowment and its institutional reforms, but it tends to be descriptive, to rely on pre-pandemic data, and to stop short of an explicit, reproducible method for prioritising interventions.

2.4 Research gap

Three gaps therefore motivate the study. The theoretical models are robust but under-applied to Central Asia with recent open data; the Uzbek literature is rich in description but light on operational measurement; and, across both strands, the translation from diagnosis to a ranked action agenda remains implicit. This paper addresses all three by operationalising the integrated model on 2017–2025 open data and by coupling it to a transparent multi-criteria prescription.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Research design

The study adopts a mixed-methods, single-country case design. A case design is appropriate because the aim is analytical rather than statistical generalisation: Uzbekistan is treated as a revelatory case of a fast-emerging destination in which the gap between potential and realisation is unusually visible. Quantitative secondary-data analysis is combined with a structured qualitative assessment so that the two triangulate. The unit of analysis is the national destination, with selected reference to the leading city destinations of Samarkand, Bukhara and Khiva.

3.2 Data sources

All data are drawn from open, publicly available secondary sources, which makes the analysis fully reproducible. The principal sources are: the national statistics authorities and the

Committee for Tourism of the Republic of Uzbekistan (visitor arrivals, exports, employment, accommodation and operator counts); UN Tourism / the World Tourism Barometer (international benchmarking and growth rankings); the World Economic Forum Travel and Tourism Development Index 2024 (structural competitiveness pillars); the World Travel and Tourism Council economic-impact series (GDP and employment contribution); the World Bank World Development Indicators (long-run arrivals); and the policy corpus of the Uzbekistan-2030 Strategy and Presidential Resolution PQ-238 of 2023. The conceptual scaffolding that organises these data is the integrated determinant model, reproduced in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Integrated conceptual model of tourist-destination potential

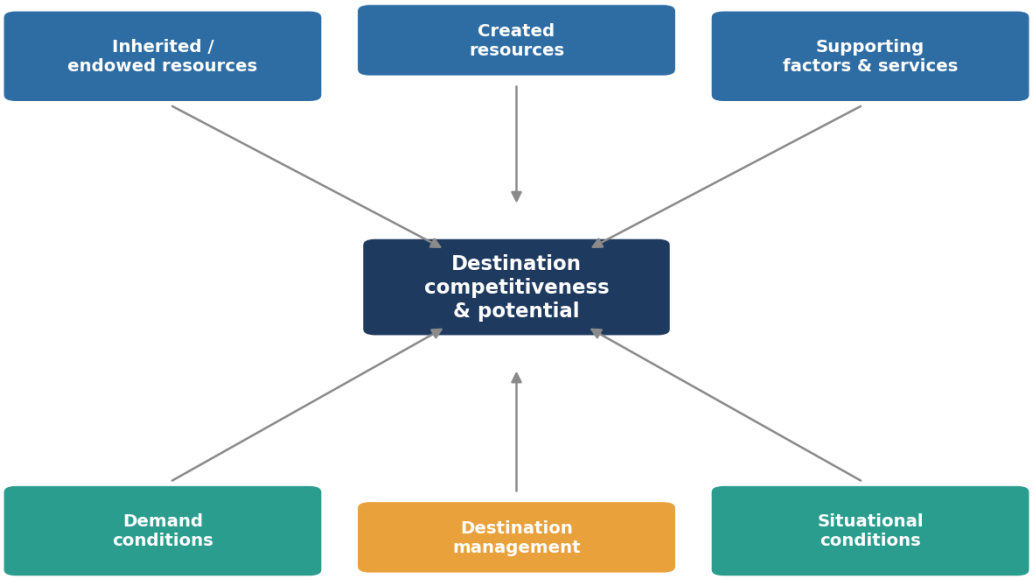

Figure 4. *Integrated conceptual model of tourist-destination potential used to organise the analysis.*

Source: adapted by the authors from Ritchie & Crouch (2003) and Dwyer & Kim (2003).

A methodological caveat concerns the measurement of inbound flows. Uzbek sources report two related but distinct series: a broader count of foreign citizens crossing the border (which reached roughly 10.1 million in 2024) and a narrower count of visitors travelling for tourism purposes (about 8.0 million in 2024, rising 20% on 2023). To preserve internal consistency with the widely reported headline growth of 46.8% for 2025, this paper anchors its demand series on the latter, tourism-purpose measure and treats the broader figure as an upper bound. All growth rates are computed on the reported series.

3.3 Analytical framework

The analysis proceeds in four complementary steps.

- **Trend analysis.** Arrivals and export series for 2017–2025 are tabulated and charted to characterise recovery, momentum and structural change in source markets.
- **Weighted composite-potential assessment.** Following the logic of Dwyer and Kim (2003) and of composite-index practice (Gooroochurn and Sugiyarto, 2005), the six determinant groups are assigned policy weights and scored on a 1–5 scale, and a weighted mean is computed. The scoring is an explicit, expert-informed illustration of the method rather than a precise

measurement, and the weights are reported transparently so that readers may substitute their own.

- **SWOT assessment.** Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats are derived from the quantitative findings and the reform context, providing the qualitative counterpart to the index.
- **Target-gap analysis.** Realised indicators are compared with the quantitative targets of the Uzbekistan-2030 Strategy (15 million foreign visitors and US$5 billion of tourism-services exports) to size the remaining effort and to anchor the prescriptive agenda.

The composite score is computed as a weighted sum, $S = \Sigma (w_i \cdot s_i)$, where w_i is the weight of determinant i ($\Sigma w_i = 1$) and s_i is its score on the 1–5 scale. The design deliberately favours transparency and low data requirements over sophistication, so that the instrument can be reused by destination-management organisations that lack access to proprietary datasets.

3.4 Limitations

Three limitations should be borne in mind. First, secondary data are subject to definitional differences and revision, as the arrivals caveat illustrates. Second, the composite scores are expert-informed and therefore carry a degree of subjectivity; they are offered to demonstrate the method and should be re-estimated with survey or panel data before being used for funding decisions. Third, a single-country design supports analytical, not statistical, generalisation. These limitations are revisited in Section 5.

4. Results

4.1 Dynamics of inbound demand and exports

Table 1 and Figures 1 and 2 summarise the sector's trajectory. After expanding rapidly in 2018–2019, inbound flows collapsed in 2020 under the impact of COVID-19, falling to about 1.5 million visitors. Recovery was swift once restrictions eased: by 2023 arrivals had returned to their pre-pandemic level, and in 2024 they rose a further 20% to roughly 8.0 million. The decisive break came in 2025, when the tourism-purpose series reached 11.7 million visitors — a 46.8% year-on-year increase — with monthly arrivals exceeding one million for the first time in the country's history from April onwards.

Table 1. Dynamics of inbound tourism demand and tourism-services exports, 2017–2025

Year	Foreign visitors (million)	Annual growth (%)	Tourism-services export (US$ bn)
2017	2.69	—	—
2018	5.35	+98.9	—
2019	6.75	+26.2	1.31
2020	1.50	−77.8	0.26
2021	1.88	+25.3	0.49
2022	5.23	+178.2	1.63
2023	6.63	+26.8	2.14
2024	8.00	+20.7	3.52
2025	11.70	+46.3	4.40

Source: compiled by the authors from the national statistics authorities, the Committee for Tourism and UN Tourism. Growth rates are computed on the tourism-purpose series; the officially reported headline growth for 2025 is +46.8%.

Figure 1. Dynamics of foreign visitor arrivals to Uzbekistan, 2017–2025

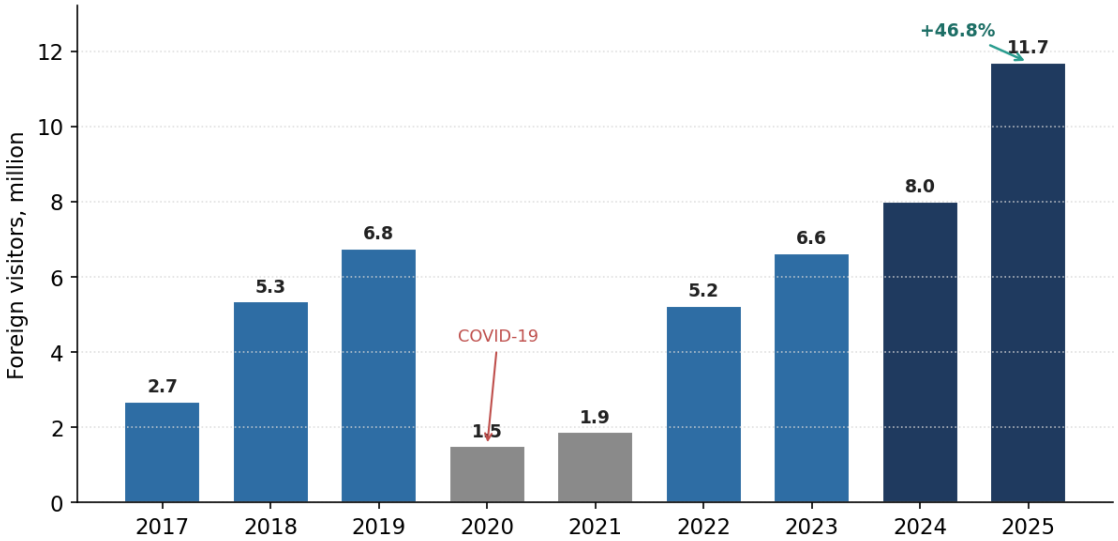

Figure 1. *Dynamics of foreign visitor arrivals to Uzbekistan, 2017–2025 (million).*
Source: authors' elaboration on national statistics and UN Tourism data.

The economic translation of this demand is equally striking. Tourism-services exports rose from US$2.14 billion in 2023 to US$3.52 billion in 2024 and surpassed US$4.4 billion in 2025 (Figure 2), while the sector generated some 51,000 new jobs in 2024 alone. Exports have thus more than tripled in three years and are converging on the 2030 target of US$5 billion well ahead of schedule, underscoring the strength of the demand shock but also the pressure it places on supply-side capacity.

Figure 2. Export earnings from tourism services, 2019–2025

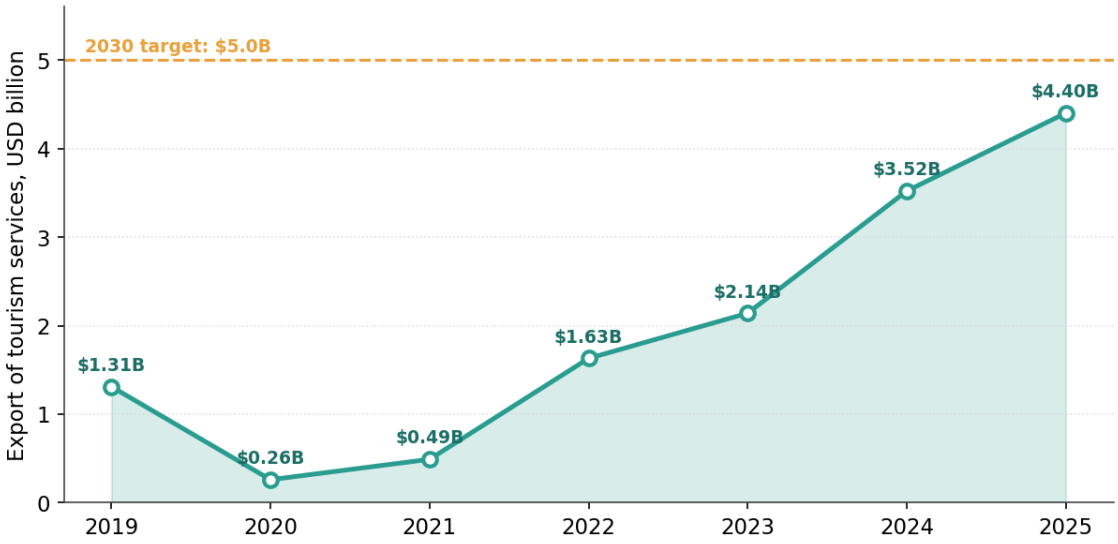

Figure 2. *Export earnings from tourism services, 2019–2025 (US$ billion), against the 2030 target.*
Source: authors' elaboration on Committee for Tourism data.

4.2 Structure of the flow and source markets

The composition of demand is changing more slowly than its volume. Neighbouring and CIS markets still dominate: Kyrgyzstan alone supplied about 3.3 million visitors in 2025, and Kazakhstan and Tajikistan together a further 2.7 million. At the same time, the diversification long

sought by policymakers is visibly under way. The share of citizens from neighbouring countries fell from 87% in 2018 to 80% in 2024, while the share of Europe and other distant markets rose from 5.3% to 9.0% (Figure 3). High-growth long-haul and Asian markets reinforce the trend: arrivals from China grew roughly 3.8-fold and from Afghanistan about 6.5-fold year-on-year, and those from Turkmenistan rose 87%. Table 2 records the leading markets and growth signals.

Table 2. Leading source markets and growth signals, 2025

Source market	Inbound flow, 2025	Growth signal
Kyrgyzstan	~ 3.3 million	Largest single source market
Kazakhstan + Tajikistan	~ 2.7 million (combined)	Principal overland neighbours
Turkmenistan	—	+87% year-on-year
China	—	~ 3.8× year-on-year
Afghanistan	—	~ 6.5× year-on-year
Europe & distant markets	9% share (↑ from 5.3% in 2018)	Fastest-diversifying segment
Total inbound	11.7 million	+46.8% vs. 2024

Source: compiled by the authors from Committee for Tourism releases and UN Tourism. Dashes denote markets reported by growth rate rather than absolute level.

Figure 3. Geographic structure of the inbound tourist flow, 2025

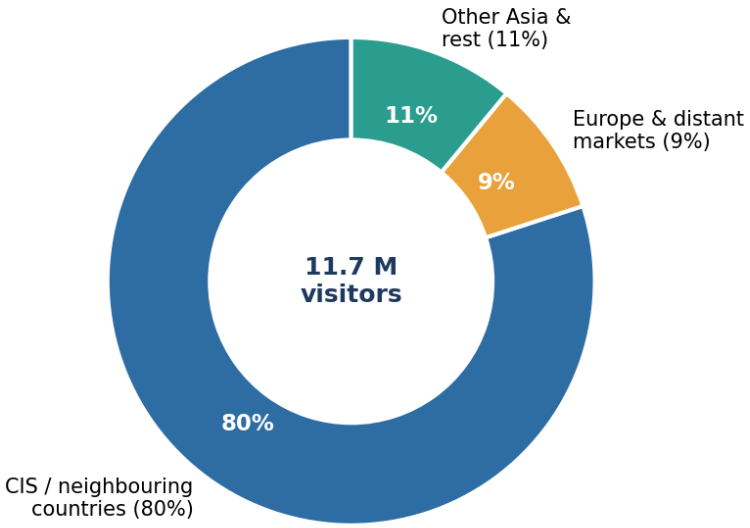

Figure 3. *Geographic structure of the inbound tourist flow, 2025.*
Source: authors' elaboration; shares based on Committee for Tourism data.

Two implications follow. First, the destination remains heavily exposed to a small number of proximity markets, which raises the strategic value of diversification toward higher-spending, longer-staying long-haul segments. Second, the very fast growth of selected distant markets suggests that targeted connectivity and marketing can shift the mix relatively quickly.

4.3 Supply-side conditions and structural competitiveness

On the supply side, the reform dividend is visible in both infrastructure and international benchmarking. By 2024 more than 350 hotels met international standards, the number of tour operators and travel agencies had reached 3,581 (762 of them newly established during the year),

and the corps of guide-interpreters had grown by 700 to about 3,200 (Table 7). Structurally, Uzbekistan recorded the single largest improvement of any economy in the World Economic Forum's Travel and Tourism Development Index, climbing from 94th place in 2019 to 78th in 2024 — a gain of sixteen positions and 7.8% in score that placed it among the ten most-improved performers worldwide (Figure 5).

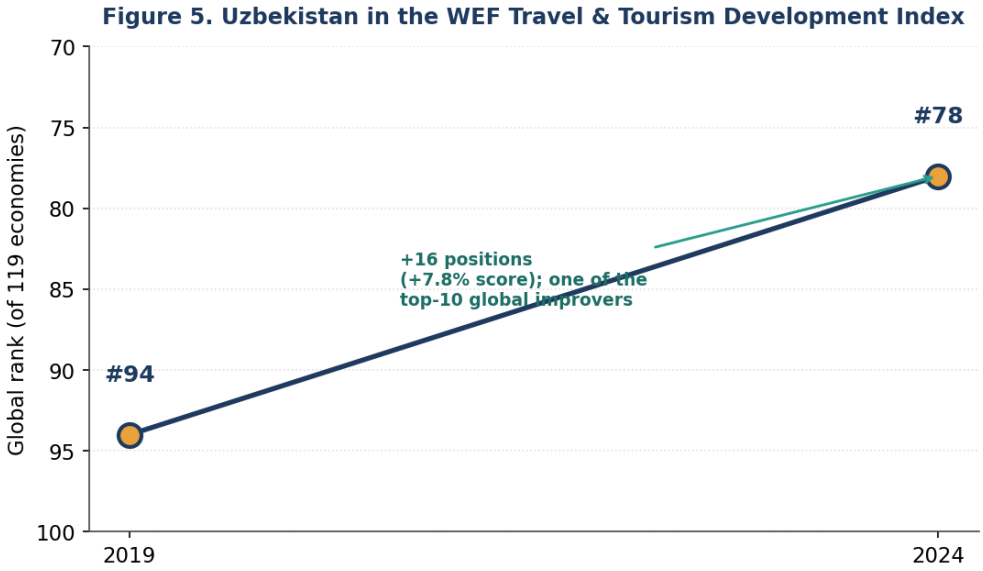

Figure 5. *Uzbekistan's global rank in the WEF Travel & Tourism Development Index, 2019 vs. 2024 (lower is better).*

Source: World Economic Forum, Travel & Tourism Development Index 2024.

Table 7. Selected tourism-infrastructure and economic-impact indicators

Indicator	2024 status	Recent change
Hotels meeting international standards	350+	Rapid expansion
Tour operators & travel agencies	3,581	+762 new entities in 2024
Guide-interpreters	~ 3,200	+700 in 2024
New jobs (tourism & hospitality)	~ 51,000	created in 2024
Hotels market volume	~ US$271 mln (2025)	Largest accommodation segment
Direct T&T contribution to GDP	~ UZS 2,030 bn (~0.9%)	Total contribution higher

Source: compiled by the authors from the Committee for Tourism, WTTC and market statistics. Figures are indicative and subject to revision.

Despite this progress, the supply side still trails the endowment. Direct travel-and-tourism value added remained modest as a share of GDP, the accommodation stock is concentrated in the upper and budget segments with a thin mid-market, and connectivity, digital services and human capital were repeatedly identified as binding constraints. The structural picture is therefore one of a destination whose comparative advantage (inherited resources) is world-class but whose competitive advantage (created resources and management) is still being built.

4.4 Composite assessment of destination potential

Applying the weighted composite method to the six determinant groups yields the profile in Table 5. Endowed resources score very highly, and demand conditions are favourable, but created resources, supporting infrastructure and destination management score around or below the mid-point. The overall weighted score of 3.47 on a 1–5 scale confirms a destination of well-above-average potential whose realised competitiveness is constrained by the mobilising factors rather than by the resource base.

Table 5. Weighted composite assessment of Uzbekistan's destination potential (illustrative)

Determinant group (Dwyer–Kim)	Weight (%)	Score (1–5)	Weighted	Assessment
Endowed (inherited) resources	25	4.5	1.13	Strong
Created resources	20	3.0	0.60	Developing
Supporting factors & infrastructure	20	2.8	0.56	Moderate
Destination management & governance	15	3.2	0.48	Improving
Demand conditions	12	3.8	0.46	Favourable
Situational conditions	8	3.0	0.24	Mixed
Composite score	100	—	3.47	Above midpoint

Source: authors' expert-informed scoring following Dwyer & Kim (2003). Scores: 1 = very weak … 5 = very strong. Weights are policy choices reported transparently for replication.

4.5 SWOT assessment

The qualitative counterpart to the index is set out in Table 4. It confirms that the destination's strengths and opportunities are dominated by its heritage endowment, safety and reform momentum, whereas its weaknesses and threats cluster around seasonality, spatial concentration, human capital, connectivity and external volatility.

Table 4. SWOT assessment of Uzbekistan as a tourist destination

Strengths (S)	Weaknesses (W)
• World-class UNESCO heritage on the Silk Road (Samarkand, Bukhara, Khiva) • Reputation as a safe destination • Visa-free access for 90+ countries • Very fast demand growth (+46.8% in 2025) • Strong political commitment (Uzbekistan-2030)	• Short average length of stay and marked seasonality • Flows concentrated in 3–4 cities • Shortage of qualified hospitality staff and guides • Thin mid-market hotel stock; limited direct air links

	• Under-developed digital / experience economy
Opportunities (O)	**Threats (T)**
• MICE, halal, eco-, gastronomy and health niches • Smart-destination tools and digital marketing • Regional (Central Asia) joint Silk-Road products • Rising Chinese and South-Asian markets • US$5 bn export and 15 mln visitor targets by 2030	• Regional geopolitical volatility • Global slowdown affecting long-haul demand • Over-tourism and heritage carrying-capacity risks • Intensifying regional competition (Kazakhstan, Georgia, Azerbaijan) • Climate and water stress

Source: compiled by the authors from the quantitative findings and the policy context.

4.6 Gap to the 2030 targets

Finally, Figure 6 places realised performance against the Uzbekistan-2030 Strategy. On the tourism-purpose series, arrivals of 11.7 million in 2025 leave a gap of roughly 3.3 million to the 15-million target, while exports of US$4.4 billion are within US$0.6 billion of the US$5-billion goal. On current momentum both targets are attainable, but closing the arrivals gap sustainably — rather than through proximity-market volume alone — depends on the supply-side and management upgrades identified above.

Figure 6. Actual arrivals versus the Uzbekistan-2030 Strategy target

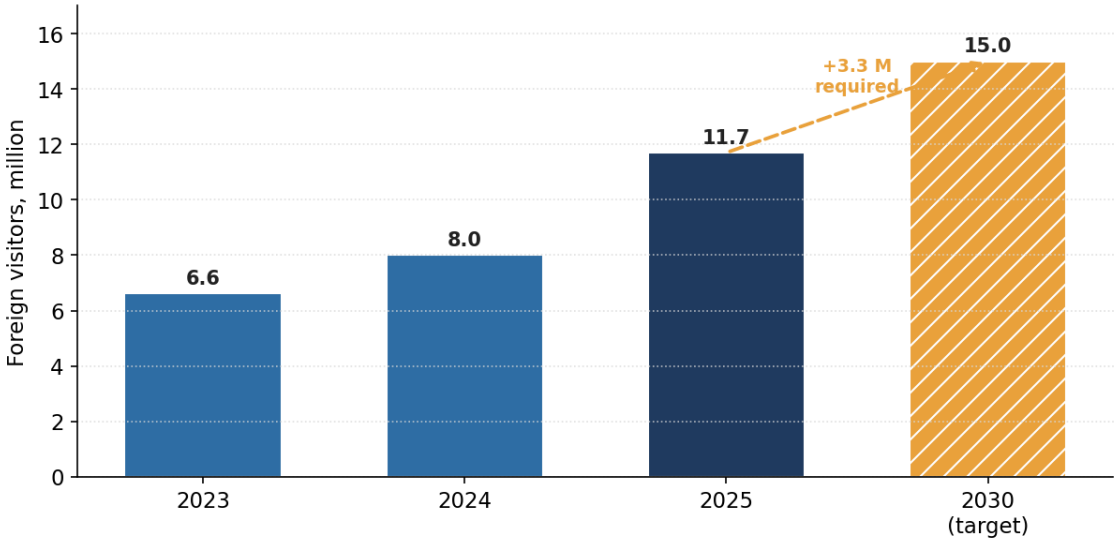

Figure 6. *Actual arrivals versus the Uzbekistan-2030 Strategy target (million).*
Source: authors' elaboration on national data and the Uzbekistan-2030 Strategy.

5. Discussion

5.1 Interpreting the potential–realisation gap

The results tell a coherent story. Uzbekistan's inbound sector is expanding at a pace few destinations can match, and its structural indicators are improving faster than almost any peer. Yet the composite assessment and the SWOT converge on a single diagnosis: the country's **comparative advantage** in inherited resources is world-class, while its **competitive advantage** in created resources, supporting factors and destination management is still maturing. This is exactly the configuration that the foundational models (Crouch and Ritchie, 1999; Ritchie and Crouch, 2003;

Dwyer and Kim, 2003) predict for a resource-rich destination in an early growth phase, and it explains why headline growth, though impressive, cannot by itself be equated with durable competitiveness. The policy implication is that the marginal return to investment now lies less in promoting the endowment and more in building the mechanisms that convert it into longer stays, higher spend and wider geographic and seasonal spread.

5.2 An improved method for enhancing destination potential

The paper's methodological contribution is to make the move from diagnosis to prescription explicit and reproducible. Combining the weighted composite index (which localises the binding constraints), the SWOT (which contextualises them) and the target-gap analysis (which sizes the effort) yields a transparent, low-data decision-support instrument. Read together, the three lenses point to seven mutually reinforcing directions for enhancing potential, each attached to a measurable target in Table 6.

- **Product diversification.** Develop MICE, eco-, gastronomy, health and thematic Silk-Road itineraries to lengthen stays and spread demand beyond the three headline cities.
- **Digitalisation and the smart destination.** Deploy a unified destination-management system, open data, e-visa and online booking, and analytics-driven marketing, following the smart-destination logic of Buhalis and Amaranggana (2015).
- **Connectivity.** Expand direct air routes and pursue open-skies and regional-rail links to convert fast-growing distant markets into sustained flows.
- **Quality and human capital.** Institutionalise service standards, training and certification of guides and hospitality staff to address the most frequently cited constraint.
- **Seasonality and regional spread.** Programme off-season events and activate secondary destinations to reduce peak-month concentration and heritage carrying-capacity pressure.
- **Sustainability.** Introduce carrying-capacity limits at flagship sites and support community-based tourism so that growth does not erode the very assets that create potential.
- **Branding and marketing.** Sustain a coherent international 'Uzbekistan — the Silk Road' brand aligned with the 15-million-visitor and US$5-billion-export targets.

Table 6. Prioritised directions for enhancing destination potential and their 2030 indicators

Strategic direction	Key measures	Target indicator (2030)
Product diversification	MICE, eco-, gastronomy, health and Silk-Road routes	≥ 8 mature product lines
Digital & smart destination	Unified DMS, e-visa, analytics, online booking	Rising digital-maturity index
Connectivity	New air routes, open skies, regional rail	Air seat capacity +50%
Quality & human capital	Standards, training, guide certification	10,000+ certified staff
Seasonality & regional spread	Off-season events, secondary destinations	Peak-month share < 15%
Sustainability	Carrying-capacity limits, community tourism	More certified sustainable sites
Branding & marketing	Global 'Uzbekistan — the Silk Road' campaign	15 mln visitors; US$5 bn export

Source: compiled by the authors from the composite assessment, SWOT and the Uzbekistan-2030 Strategy.

5.3 Comparison with prior work, limitations and future research

These findings are consistent with the theoretical expectation that management and created resources, not endowments, are the binding constraints on mature competitiveness (Enright and Newton, 2004; Crouch, 2011), and they extend the largely descriptive Uzbek literature (Tukhliev and Abdullaeva, 2015; Safarov, 2016; Erkaeva, 2023) by supplying an explicit measurement-to-action pathway. The study's limitations qualify but do not overturn its conclusions. The demand series is sensitive to the definitional choice discussed in Section 3; the composite scores are expert-informed and should be re-estimated with survey and panel data and with sensitivity analysis on the weights; and a single-country design supports analytical rather than statistical generalisation. Future research could operationalise the full eighty-five-indicator battery, benchmark Uzbekistan against regional competitors such as Kazakhstan, Georgia and Azerbaijan, and test the relationship between the composite score and realised visitor spend using econometric methods.

6. Conclusion

This article set out to improve the methods by which the potential of tourist destinations is assessed and enhanced, using Uzbekistan as a case of a fast-emerging Silk-Road destination. Analysing open data for 2017–2025, it documented an exceptional post-pandemic surge — 11.7 million foreign visitors and more than US$4.4 billion of tourism exports in 2025, with a sixteen-place jump in the Travel and Tourism Development Index — while showing, through a weighted composite assessment and a structured SWOT, that the destination's realised competitiveness is constrained not by its resource base but by created resources, supporting infrastructure and management capacity.

The study's principal contribution is a transparent, low-data, multi-criteria instrument that links diagnosis to a prioritised action agenda benchmarked against the Uzbekistan-2030 Strategy. Its seven directions — diversification, digitalisation, connectivity, quality and human capital, seasonality management, sustainability and branding — offer policymakers and destination-management organisations a replicable template for converting latent potential into durable, sustainable competitiveness. The framework is portable: applied with local data, it can guide investment prioritisation in other emerging destinations facing the same gap between abundant potential and still-maturing competitiveness.

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