



## WHY UZBEKISTAN BECAME ONE OF THE WORLD'S FASTEST-GROWING TOURISM DESTINATIONS (2016–2025)

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**Annotation.** This article examines the extraordinary transformation of Uzbekistan into one of the world's fastest-growing tourism destinations between 2016 and 2025. Following the accession of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev in late 2016, the country implemented a comprehensive tourism liberalization strategy designed to unlock its immense historical and cultural potential—centered on the ancient Silk Road cities of Samarkand, Bukhara, and Khiva.

**Key words:** Tourism, visa liberalization, e-visa system, visa-free regime, tourism policy reform, high-speed rail tourism, hospitality infrastructure, digital tourism marketing, tourism GDP contribution, adventure tourism, gastronomic tourism, plov route, craft tourism, sustainable tourism.

**Introduction.** Located at the very crossroads of the ancient Silk Road, Uzbekistan has always possessed an almost unfair concentration of historical and cultural treasures: the dazzling Registan in Samarkand, the perfectly preserved walled city-museum of Khiva, the majestic palaces of Bukhara, and the rapidly modernizing yet soulful capital Tashkent. For decades, however, these wonders remained largely inaccessible to the outside world due to cumbersome visa procedures, limited flights, outdated hotels, and a generally closed image inherited from the Soviet and early independence periods.



Everything began to change in late 2016. Under President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's leadership, Uzbekistan launched one of the most ambitious tourism liberalization programs in modern history. The results have been nothing short of spectacular: from fewer than 2 million foreign visitors in 2016, the country welcomed 6.75 million tourists in 2019, recovered to 6.6 million in 2023, surged to 10.2 million in 2024, and recorded 9.7 million arrivals in just the first ten months of 2025 alone. Tourism export revenue reached \$3.5 billion in 2025, with projections exceeding \$4 billion for the full year. According to the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), Uzbekistan consistently ranked among the top five fastest-growing destinations globally between 2018 and 2025.

This transformation was not accidental. It was the result of deliberate, well-sequenced reforms in four key areas: visa policy, aviation and ground transport, hospitality infrastructure, international marketing, and human capital development.

### **1. Visa Revolution: From “Hardest to Enter” to “Easiest in the Region”**

Before 2017, obtaining an Uzbek visa often took weeks and required a letter of invitation. In February 2018, Uzbekistan launched a fully electronic visa (e-visa) system valid for 90 countries. By 2019–2020, visa-free entry for up to 30 days was granted to citizens of 90+ countries, and 60–90-day visa-free regimes were introduced for several European nations, Israel, South Korea, Japan, Singapore, and others. In 2021, the list expanded to 120 countries for visa-free or visa-on-arrival access.

The effect was immediate and measurable:

- 2017: 2.69 million foreign arrivals (+34% vs 2016)
- 2018: 5.35 million (+91%)
- 2019: 6.75 million (+26%)

Source: State Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan for Tourism Development, 2025



## 2. Aviation and Transport Connectivity Boom

Uzbekistan Airways was modernized and low-cost carrier partnerships were forged. Weekly international seats grew from ~45,000 in 2016 to over 220,000 by 2025. New direct routes were opened to London, Paris, Frankfurt, Rome, Milan, New York, Seoul, Tokyo, Kuala Lumpur, Jakarta, and dozens of other cities. On the ground, the high-speed Afrosiyob train network expanded: Tashkent–Samarkand (2 hours), Tashkent–Bukhara (3h 45m), Tashkent–Khiva (2024 extension). Tashkent International Airport's new terminal (opened 2023) can now handle 3,500 passengers per hour. Navoi and Samarkand airports were upgraded to full international status.

## 3. Hospitality Infrastructure: From Shortage to Choice

In 2016, Uzbekistan had fewer than 800 registered accommodation facilities with ~35,000 beds, most of them outdated Soviet-era hotels. By the end of 2025, the country offers:

- 2,180 registered hotels and guesthouses
- Over 185,000 certified beds
- 45 five-star properties (vs only 4 in 2016)
- 180+ boutique and heritage hotels in historical buildings

International chains that entered the market include Hilton, Hyatt Regency, Wyndham, Radisson, Marriott, InterContinental, and Mercure. At the same time, thousands of family-run B&Bs and yurts in Nurata, Aral Sea region, and Chimган mountains added authentic experiences.

## 4. Global Marketing and Digital Presence

The Uzbekistan Tourism brand “Naturally Inspiring” was launched in 2019 and promoted at ITB Berlin, WTM London, Arabian Travel Market, and other major fairs. The country ran high-profile campaigns with CNN, BBC, National Geographic, and Euronews. On social media, the official @visituzbekistan handles



grew to millions of followers. Influencer programs invited thousands of travel bloggers and journalists annually. In 2023–2025, Uzbekistan became one of the most “TikTok-famous” destinations, with #Uzbekistan garnering over 4.8 billion views by late 2025. 2025 also saw the launch of the Uzbekistan Pass – a single digital card for museums, transport, and discounts – further simplifying the visitor experience.

## 5. UNESCO Recognition and New Tourism Products.

Five Uzbek sites are now on the UNESCO World Heritage List:

1. Itchan Kala (Khiva)
2. Historic Centre of Bukhara
3. Historic Centre of Shahrizor
4. Samarkand – Crossroads of Cultures
5. Western Tien-Shan (2016, natural site)

In addition, new niche products were developed:

- Aral Sea eco-regeneration tours
- Ski resorts in Chimgan and Beldersay
- Silk Road gastronomy routes
- Craft and textile villages (Margilan, Rishton)
- Astronomical tourism in Maidanak Observatory

## 6. Economic and Social Impact

Direct contribution of tourism to GDP rose from 2.3% in 2016 to 8.1% in 2025 (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2025). More than 500,000 direct and indirect jobs were created. Rural communities along the Silk Road saw household incomes rise by 40–60% thanks to homestays and handicraft sales.



**Conclusion.** Uzbekistan's tourism miracle between 2016 and 2025 is one of the clearest examples in modern economic history of how bold, consistent, and well-executed reforms can unlock a country's latent potential. From one of the most closed nations in the world, it became one of the most open and welcoming. The blue domes of Samarkand that once appeared only in history books now shine on millions of travelers' Instagram feeds, and the ancient cities of the Silk Road have firmly reclaimed their place on the global tourism map. The journey is far from over. With new airports under construction, cruise tourism on the Amu Darya in development, and plans to reach 15 million annual visitors by 2030, Uzbekistan's star continues to rise brighter than ever.

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