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POSSIBILITIES FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF SPORTS TOURISM IN UZBEKISTAN

Abstract. *The article provides a systematic overview of the prerequisites and avenues for the development of sports tourism in Uzbekistan. Drawing on official statistics, international indices, and industry sources, it compares resource, infrastructural, and institutional factors, identifies market niches (alpine–mountain, mass running, adventure/active, and training-camp tourism), assesses barriers, and formulates policy measures. The theoretical framework builds on M. Weed's conceptualization of sports tourism, T. Hinch and J. Higham's development models, R. Buckley's approach to managing risk in adventure tourism, and the contemporary Visitor Use Management (VUM) framework. The empirical base includes data from the Agency of Statistics of Uzbekistan, the World Economic Forum, the World Bank, UNESCO, and sectoral reports. An analytical table of indicators and sources is presented. Practice-oriented recommendations are proposed for Uzbekistan's tourism stakeholders.*

Keywords: *sports tourism, mountain tourism, running events, adventure tourism, Uzbekistan.*

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ВОЗМОЖНОСТИ РАЗВИТИЯ НАПРАВЛЕНИЙ СПОРТИВНОГО ТУРИЗМА В УСЛОВИЯХ УЗБЕКИСТАНА

Аннотация. *В статье дан системный обзор предпосылок и направлений развития спортивного туризма в Узбекистане. На основе официальной статистики, международных индексов и отраслевых источников проведено сопоставление ресурсных, инфраструктурных и институциональных факторов, выявлены ниши (горнолыжно-горный, беговой массовый, приключенческий/активный, учебно-тренировочный сборовый туризм), оценены барьеры и сформулированы меры политики. Теоретическую рамку составляют разработки М. Уида по концептуализации спортивного туризма, Т. Хинча и Дж. Хайэма по моделям развития, Р. Бакли по управлению рисками приключенческого туризма, а также современная концепция управления рекреационными нагрузками (Visitor Use Management). В качестве эмпирической базы использованы данные Агентства статистики Узбекистана, Всемирного экономического форума, Всемирного банка, UNESCO и отраслевые отчёты. Представлена аналитическая таблица с индикаторами и источниками. Предложены практически-ориентированные рекомендации для стейкхолдеров туристической отрасли Узбекистана.*

Ключевые слова: *спортивный туризм, горный туризм, беговые события, приключенческий туризм, Узбекистан.*

Introduction

The post-pandemic cycle restored tourism's global contribution to GDP to 10 % in 2024, reaffirming the sector's strategic role in employment and regional development [1]. For Uzbekistan, sports tourism is a promising vector for diversifying the tourism offering: the country has exhibited steady growth in inbound flows (7,957.2 thousand foreign citizens in 2024) and an expanding physical culture and sports infrastructure [2]. In international comparisons, the institutional environment has become more favorable: in the Travel & Tourism Development Index (TTDI) the country rose to 78th place (2024) [3]. At the national level, a market review synthesizes infrastructural achievements, growth dynamics, and modernization gaps, and highlights diversification into eco- and gastronomic tourism – a context within which sports-tourism niches can be purposefully positioned [4].

The study's theoretical framework synthesizes several key concepts. At its core is M. Weed's portfolio approach [5], which views sports events as a complementary system for destination positioning. This is complemented by T. Hinch and J. Higham's spatio-temporal models [6], which align types of sport activity with territorial characteristics and seasonality. For adventure tourism, R. Buckley's concept of managed risk is used [7], emphasizing the importance of safety procedures. The contemporary managerial dimension is represented by the interagency Visitor Use Management (VUM) model (K. Cahill et al.) [8], designed to regulate recreational loads. Finally, climatic factors and their impact on seasonality are analyzed drawing on the syntheses of D. Scott and S. Gössling [9].

Objective – to identify and analytically describe opportunities for developing sports-tourism segments in Uzbekistan on the basis of verified statistical and factual data.

Materials and Methods

Methodologically, the study is a review-analytical work with elements of benchmarking, implemented in four steps: compilation and verification of official statistics (inbound flows, infrastructure indicators); analysis of international indices and conservation registries; case analysis of events and locations; synthesis of theoretical propositions and visitor-use management practices (VUM). Open sources were used from the Agency of Statistics of Uzbekistan (stat.uz), the World Economic Forum (TTDI-2024), the World Bank, UNESCO, as well as sectoral and media reports on mass starts and ski resorts.

Results and Discussion

To analyze the potential of sports tourism in Uzbekistan, we adapted and operationalized key theoretical tenets. M. Weed's portfolio approach was modified: the event portfolio is tied to specific regional clusters in Uzbekistan and aligned with seasonality and infrastructural capacity. The spatio-temporal frame of T. Hinch and J. Higham ("sport → space → season") underpinned a product matrix, which we augmented with indicators of site throughput and calculated "climatic windows." R. Buckley's risk scale was integrated into management solutions (guide requirements, avalanche safety) and formed the basis of the applied "risk–reward–capacity" index (RRC-index) we propose, assessing the balance between the objective difficulty of a route (Risk), its recreational value (Reward), and permissible anthropogenic load (Capacity). Finally, the VUM cycle was borrowed in full but adapted to sports tourism via a climatic module (heat stress, avalanche hazard) and threshold values for routes and events. The proposed sport–space–season matrix aligns with national diversification pathways identified in recent market research (eco-/gastronomy tracks), enabling complementary packaging with sports-tourism products (ski–run–trek) for shoulder-season smoothing.

1. Resource and infrastructural base

- Mountain and conservation assets. Within the Republic of Uzbekistan lie components of the World Heritage property “Western Tien-Shan” (2016), characterized by high biodiversity and an elevation range of 700–4,503 m, creating conditions for trekking, ski touring, and mountaineering [10]. A key backbone of active recreation is the Ugam–Chatkal National Park, with a registered area of about ≈ 5,069 km² (WDPA/Protected Planet).
- Ski infrastructure. Amirsoy is the country’s largest resort. According to the industry catalogue Skiresort, the total length of prepared slopes is 15.7 km, with 6 lifts in operation [11]. Developed ski infrastructure provides an “anchor” for winter sports tourism and training programs.
- Physical culture and sports facilities. By 2024, there were 53,314 sports facilities nationwide [12], confirming the scale of the infrastructural base for mass and club events.

2. Event (running) and mass-participation sport

Mass starts are a rapidly growing segment with demonstrated economic and image effects for destinations [13]. The VII Tashkent International Marathon in April 2025 drew about 11,500 participants from 52 countries [14], setting a new series record – indicative of the potential of urban event tourism.

3. Demand and macro-environment

As noted, inbound flows to Uzbekistan reached 7,957.2 thousand in 2024, providing a solid foundation for diversifying the product line toward sports niches. Uzbekistan’s improved TTDI (WEF) standing to 78th place in 2024, driven by factor conditions and the business environment, enhances predictability for investors in sports clusters. Related services are also expanding: the volume of services in sports, entertainment, and recreation for January–April 2025 amounted to 1,235.7 billion UZS (+18.6 % y/y) [15]. These quantitative dynamics are consistent with broader market tendencies documented in a country-level review

that underscores portfolio diversification and capacity-building in adjacent segments (e.g., eco- and gastronomic tourism), supporting the case for scalable sports-tourism offerings [4].

4. Climatic and environmental sustainability

According to the World Bank Group and the Asian Development Bank [16], Uzbekistan will face further warming and increased climate risks by century's end, necessitating adaptations (season shifts, managing loads on natural areas). The meta-review by D. Scott and S. Gössling [9] shows how climatic factors are already altering demand and the configuration of offerings, including ski and desert-based active recreation. Accordingly, sustainable use of natural locations calls for implementing Visitor Use Management as a reproducible procedure for setting "desired conditions," indicators, and monitoring [8].

To systematize the empirical material and define managerial priorities, we present a consolidated analytical matrix of sports-tourism segments. The matrix operationalizes four groups of variables:

1. anchor assets (natural–geographical locations and specialized infrastructure);
2. available statistical indicators (from official and sectoral sources);
3. development barriers (infrastructural, institutional, environmental, and safety-related);
4. proposed measures (clustering, visitor-use regulation, safety standards, product packaging).

This format simultaneously reflects resource endowment, supply status, and the necessary managerial response for each segment, while ensuring reproducibility of subsequent monitoring (using an identical set of indicators).

Table 1

Analytical matrix: segments, assets, indicators, and measures

Anchor assets (locations/infrastructure)	Available indicators (year)	Current status	Key barriers	Proposed measures
Alpine–mountain tourism				
Amirsoy (15.7 km of slopes; 6 lifts); Ugam–Chatkal NP (≈ 5,069 km²); "Western Tien-Shan" component (UNESCO)	Slope length; number of lifts; PA area	15.7 km; 6; 5,069 km² (2024–2025)	Seasonality; ecosystem load	Development of "green" logistics; VUM visitation maps; guide and avalanche-safety standards.
Running/event tourism				
Tashkent International Marathon (VII edition)	Participants, geography	≈ 11,500 from 52 countries (2025)	Route capacity and urban mobility	"Event portfolio," shoulder-season calendar; urban navigation; Event Impact Model.
Adventure/active tourism				
Trekking/ski-tour/climbing in Western Tien-Shan; cycling and water activities	PA visitation; routes	Qualitatively expanding supply	Safety; standardization	Integrate routes into VUM; guide training; insurance standards.
Training camps (high-altitude)				
High-altitude Tien-Shan sites; sports bases	Number of camps/season	Growth potential	Infrastructural bottlenecks	PPP programs for bases; medical-physiological support.

Anchor assets (locations/infrastructure)	Available indicators (year)	Current status	Key barriers	Proposed measures
Institutional environment				
Regulatory base, e-visa/visa-free; TTDI-2024	TTDI rank	78th place (2024)	Cluster-actor coordination	"One-stop shop" for events; cluster roadmaps; KPI monitoring; brand-architecture and product-portfolio diversification (eco/gastronomy ↔ sports bundles)

As Table 1 indicates, the alpine–mountain segment exhibits the greatest "maturity": the availability of specialized infrastructure and the proximity of key locations to agglomerated demand create readiness for scaling, provided that visitor-use procedures and safety standards are implemented. The running event segment is highly replicable across regional centers and serves as a "soft" lever of seasonal smoothing, whereas adventure and water activities require priority standardization of routes, guide training, and alignment with environmental regulations. Finally, the institutional block (visa regimes, actor coordination, open data) operates as a universal multiplier for all segments and should be accompanied by a measurable system of KPIs and regular publication of updated series.

Recommendations

Synthesizing the characteristics in Table 1 yields the following sequence of managerial steps:

1. Cluster formation around the most capacious locations and event "anchors" ("Tien-Shan – Charvak – Tashkent"). Link winter, summer, and event products into a unified route matrix (ski–run–trek); develop shoulder seasons (March–April; October–November) through running and cycling events. Rationale – M. Weed's portfolio approach and the event logic of F. Bazzanella, and is consistent with country-level diversification pathways reported by N. T. Azizova et al.

2. Implementation of Visitor Use Management (VUM) at "hot spots" (Chimgan, Uram-Say, high-mountain cirques), involving the setting of desired conditions, load indicators (erosion, trail width, activity-type conflict), zoning rules and seasonal limits, and monitoring/regulation procedures.

3. Introduction of safety and insurance standards for operators and participants, and workforce development for adventure tourism (guide, avalanche safety, first aid), accounting for R. Buckley's thesis on "managed risk" as product value and grounded in the proposed RRC approach to route prioritization.

4. Development of the event ecosystem (road running, trail running, road/MTB cycling): product packaging and an annual calendar focused on shoulder seasons, unified requirements for routes and medical provision, an ex-ante/ex-post system for assessing economic impact, and a "Run Uzbekistan" brand platform. Evidence of demand – the trajectory of the Tashkent Marathon.

5. Fine-tuning statistical reporting (harmonized indicator definitions, machine-readable tables) for reproducible progress monitoring; support for simplified entry regimes (e-visa/30-day visa-free for selected countries); expansion of English-language navigation and services.

Conclusion

Uzbekistan possesses a unique combination of Western Tien-Shan natural assets, expanding sports infrastructure, and a favorable institutional dynamic. The

quantitative base (growth in inbound flows, 53,314 sports facilities, expansion of adjacent services, TTDI improvement) points to the scalability of sports tourism – contingent on the implementation of VUM practices, safety standardization, and a cluster-based product approach. The identified segments – alpine–mountain, running event, adventure, and training-camp – constitute a realistic "growth matrix" over a 3–5-year horizon with a multiplicative effect for regions.

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