THE ROLE OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES IN DEVELOPING THE EXPORT OF TOURISM SERVICES: THE EXPERIENCE OF UZBEKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

The rapid growth of Uzbekistan's tourism sector over the past decade has been closely linked to the state-led digitalization of public and business services. Digital tools have simplified entry procedures, expanded the international visibility of the national tourism product and helped local tour operators access external markets at lower transaction costs. In 2024 Uzbekistan welcomed about 10.2 million foreign visitors and earned roughly 3.5 billion USD from tourism, and in the first nine months of 2025 export of tourism services had already surpassed 3.6 billion USD, showing that technology-backed reforms are being converted into hard currency inflows. The article examines the key digital solutions introduced in Uzbekistan—national tourism portal, electronic visa, online promotion and booking systems—and evaluates their contribution to the growth of export-oriented tourism services. The study argues that the combination of administrative digitalization and market-driven online platforms created an integrated digital environment that reduced barriers for foreign tourists and increased the country's attractiveness for high-spending segments. Remaining constraints are related to interoperability of systems, staff skills and multilingual digital content.

KEYWORDS: Digitalization; e-visa; tourism exports; Uzbekistan; online platforms; smart tourism; service economy.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is one of the most dynamic export components of Uzbekistan's service sector. After the liberalization of visa and currency regimes and the adoption of digital government platforms, the country moved from several million visitors to more than 10 million arrivals, bringing tourism income to 3.5 billion USD in 2024 and setting a trajectory to exceed this level in 2025. Already by October 2025 the Tourism Committee reported more than 8.6 million foreign tourists and month-by-month records of over one million visitors, which confirms the growing external demand for Uzbek tourism services. This growth did not happen only because of infrastructural projects; it was made possible by digital technologies that lowered the "entry cost" for foreign tourists, enabled direct marketing of tour packages and provided transparent payment and booking mechanisms. The experience of Uzbekistan is therefore illustrative for transition economies that seek to turn cultural and historical assets into exportable tourism services without overloading foreign tourists with procedural barriers.

The research is based on a qualitative analysis of open government sources (national tourism portal, electronic visa portal, news of the Tourism Committee), international trade and investment reports, and media materials on tourism reforms. A comparative-descriptive method was used to trace how particular digital tools—e-visa.gov.uz, Uzbekistan.travel, unified

public services portals—affected the outreach to foreign markets and the perception of Uzbekistan as a convenient destination. Content analysis of official news feeds for 2024–2025 was applied to identify state priorities in digital promotion of tourism. The findings are interpreted within the service-export approach, where the tourist physically consumes the service in the exporting country, but the transaction, marketing and pre-trip experience are almost fully mediated by digital channels.

The first and arguably most influential digital innovation was the launch and continuous upgrading of the electronic visa system, which allowed citizens of several dozen countries to apply online, track the status and enter Uzbekistan for up to 30 days. This instrument removed the need to contact consular offices and synchronized with a expanding list of visa-free regimes, thus making Uzbekistan more competitive in the regional tourism market. For an export-oriented tourism model this is critical, because the "cost" of access is paid before the tourist even considers buying local services, and digitalization directly reduces that cost.

The second pillar of growth was the national tourism portal Uzbekistan.travel, administered by the national PR center. The portal presents the country in several languages, aggregates information on routes, events and investment opportunities and, more importantly, works as a permanent digital showcase for foreign tour operators and independent travelers. Its content is actively promoted through international media partnerships—for example, targeted campaigns in European markets in 2025—which expands the geography of demand and shifts the structure of incoming flows toward solvent segments. Since tourism services—accommodation, guided tours, MICE activities—are priced in freely convertible currency or at market-linked rates, every additional foreign visitor attracted through digital channels directly increases export revenue.

Third, the wider ecosystem of digital public services (my.gov.uz, transport and airline booking systems, online payment gateways) enabled a seamless pre-trip and in-trip experience. Foreign tourists can solve most bureaucratic issues online, select regional destinations such as Samarkand, Bukhara or Khiva, buy rail or air tickets and pay electronically, which removes uncertainty and strengthens trust in the destination. This administrative transparency has been synchronized with aggressive online marketing and the reconstruction of key gateways, leading to stable monthly inflows above one million visitors in 2025. As a consequence, tourism service exports rose from about 1.6 billion USD in 2022 to 2.5 billion USD targeted for 2024 and further to 3.5 billion USD actually earned in 2024, after which, in the first nine months of 2025, they exceeded 3.6 billion USD. The dynamics show that every new digitalization wave produces a tangible effect on exports.

At the same time, the Uzbek experience reveals several constraints. A considerable share of regional tour operators still lack fully functional multilingual websites and rely on social networks, which limits their visibility in high-income markets. Integration between national portals, booking engines and private CRM systems is not always smooth, which produces duplication of data and weak analytics. Finally, persistent skills gaps in digital marketing, data protection and online customer service slow down the transition to a genuinely smart-tourism model. Overcoming these constraints will allow Uzbekistan to move from simply attracting more tourists to selling more diversified, higher-value digital tourism products—virtual guided experiences, hybrid cultural events, and bundled regional tours.

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Uzbekistan's practice demonstrates that digital technologies are no longer an auxiliary element of tourism policy; they are the main channel through which tourism services become an export commodity. By combining an e-visa system, a multilingual national portal, digital public services and targeted online promotion, the country has significantly expanded its external demand base and converted it into record tourism revenues. Further progress will depend on deeper integration of state and private platforms, development of big-data analytics for destination management, protection of users' personal data and constant renewal of online content in the languages of promising source markets. If these directions are pursued, Uzbekistan will be able not only to preserve the current growth of tourism exports but also to increase the share of high-yield services.

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