

The role of mountain culture in the development of tourism: the example of Azerbaijan

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Abstract. In this study, we focused on the role of mountain culture in tourism development using the case of Azerbaijan. We found that advances in information technology have led to innovations in the tourism sector. Faster dissemination of information and more accessible advertising on social media have contributed to the growth of tourism. We also identified opportunities for research and development in the field of mountain culture to further promote Azerbaijani tourism. In particular, we assessed the potential of mountain culture in the Shahdag winter tourism development model in northern Azerbaijan.

Keywords: tourism, Azerbaijan, mountain, Shahdag, growth, Kharibulbul.

1 Introduction

Tourism has recently become one of the most studied fields and a primary research direction within recreational geography, prompting extensive research efforts in this area. This field of science is closely interconnected with both economic geography and population geography. It is well understood that to successfully develop any tourism zone, a thorough study of the region's history, geography, and cultural heritage is essential. Tourism not only facilitates the organization of people's travels but also plays a key role in broadening their worldviews and enhancing their knowledge across various fields. In today's world, the organization of tourism cannot be separated from cultural processes. Applied cultural studies regard tourism as a vital branch of cultural science and a form of social and cultural activity that takes place during leisure time, enriching both individuals and communities [1-4].

Transforming Azerbaijan into a tourism-friendly or tourism-profiled country presents a crucial opportunity and policy for asserting itself on the global stage. The nation's rich natural resources, favourable geographical location, ancient history, and architectural monuments, as well as the Caspian Sea's coastline, all hold immense potential for the development of tourism. However, how can we turn a country with such abundant natural resources into a top tourist destination? First and foremost, Azerbaijan must adopt a sound policy and develop an effective strategy in this area. It is important to note that tourism is one of the key directions for national interests and economic growth. Every citizen should understand that tourism can solve socio-economic problems. It also helps mitigate social polarization and stratification within society by fostering a more balanced distribution of national income

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among the population.

Tourism is widely recognized as an integral part of the economy. Undoubtedly, the formation of an organized and well-planned tourism policy and its successful implementation is not an easy task. It is not enough to have only tourism resources and potential. In order for Azerbaijan, despite its abundant tourism resources, to be recognized as a tourism region at the international level, it must meet world standards. Political, economic and socio-cultural conditions for the development of this sector have emerged only in recent years, and now we are seeing significant progress in this area in Azerbaijan. The main goal of the national tourism policy is to create a reliable tourism market. The products presented in this market should be original and competitive. Prices for hotels, accommodation and transportation services should be set in accordance with the financial capabilities and preferences of tourists. At the same time, the desire and initiative to create a tourism product often arise in regional areas.

It would be wrong to assume that tourism development depends solely on economic factors. Azerbaijan, located in a complex geopolitical space, should present itself to the world more realistically. It is well known that many of the foreign tourists who travel are well educated or are distinguished citizens of their countries. Providing these people with extensive information about the history, culture and moral values of the country can further promote the growth of tourism. After returning to their countries, many of these visitors share their experiences through public channels and the media, creating interest in others to visit these historical places themselves. Overall, the globalization of tourism is a fundamental reality of our time. Countries that prioritize tourism organizations embrace the world in its entirety and actively work to maintain peace and security in all regions. On September 25, 2001, during the 14th General Assembly of the World Tourism Organization held in the capital of the Republic of South Korea, Azerbaijan became a member of this international tourism organization. It is worth noting that every year, September 27 is celebrated as "Tourism Day" in Azerbaijan. Today, tourism in Azerbaijan is being developed as an important aspect of modern life and culture, as well as a form of international relations. In addition to the major cities of Baku, Ganja, and Sumgayit, hotels, recreational areas, entertainment venues, and sports centres are also flourishing in the regions. Notable examples include the Qafqaz hotel chain, the Gabaland Amusement Park in Gabala, the "Tufandag" winter tourism complex, and the "Shahdag" tourism centre in the Gusar district.

To further promote domestic tourism, Yanardag and Nardaran Fortress have been added to the tourist route. The "Gala" State Historical Ethnographic Museum has been established. Furthermore, the "Khinalig Development Program" project has been developed to preserve the Khinalig State Historical-Architectural and Ethnographic Reserve as a cultural, historical, and ethnographic site, while also enhancing its tourism potential. Azerbaijan's favourable climate, therapeutic mineral waters, oil, and mud baths offer vast opportunities for the development of health tourism. The increase in the number of state nature reserves and national parks within the country has accelerated the growth of ecological and exotic tourism types.

The growing tourism potential in Azerbaijan signals further significant development in this field in the years to come. Following the liberation of Karabakh from occupation, new opportunities have emerged for tourism development in the region. Cities with rich historical significance, such as Shusha, along with other liberated areas, are experiencing steady tourism growth. This region has become a point of great interest for historians and cultural studies scholars alike. In Shusha, the cultural and artistic cradle of Azerbaijan, the historic "Kharibulbul" Festival has been revived, and the "Kharibulbul" Hotel has been reconstructed. Shusha is being restored in a way that preserves its historical character while also adopting the most modern forms of urban design. A state-of-the-art tourism infrastructure is being developed, meeting contemporary standards.

Notably, with the foundation of a new mosque to be built in a modern architectural style, this structure is expected to become one of Shusha's finest architectural landmarks shortly. Shusha, home to natural wonders such as Isa Spring, Turshsu, Sekili Spring, and Soyuqbulaq, is poised to become one of the most beautiful tourism centres, not only in Azerbaijan but also across the Turkic and Islamic worlds, the Caucasus, and, potentially, the entire globe.

While Azerbaijan's tourism potential has been studied to a considerable extent, the influence of mountain culture on tourism, as well as the geographical and historical-cultural roles of mountain culture, remain largely unexplored. This study aims to examine the impact of Azerbaijan's mountain culture on tourism and to investigate the development of mountain tourism in the northern tourism regions.

2 Research method

The research examined Azerbaijan's tourism potential, with a focus on the opportunities presented by its mountainous regions. The study explored the possibilities for winter and summer tourism, as well as the impact of mountain culture on attracting tourists. It also investigated the role that historical and cultural landmarks play in the development of tourism. Azerbaijan's tourism map was used to identify potential mountain tourism sites across the country. Both post-conflict areas and regions unaffected by war, where mountain culture thrives, were analyzed. Geographical, economic, and historical-cultural data were presented. It was determined that for the successful development of tourism based on mountain culture, both economic and geographical factors are critical. High-quality and safe road infrastructure significantly boosts tourist numbers, especially during the winter months, when ensuring that roads are accessible despite weather conditions becomes essential. Additionally, the enhancement of transportation and safety standards will contribute to long-term sustainable tourism growth in these regions.

3 Results and Discussions

In recent years, the number of tourists coming to Azerbaijan has been increasing. Historical, cultural and recreational places here attract the attention of foreign tourists. Therefore, tourists come from different countries. Figure 1 shows the number of tourists visiting the country by year.

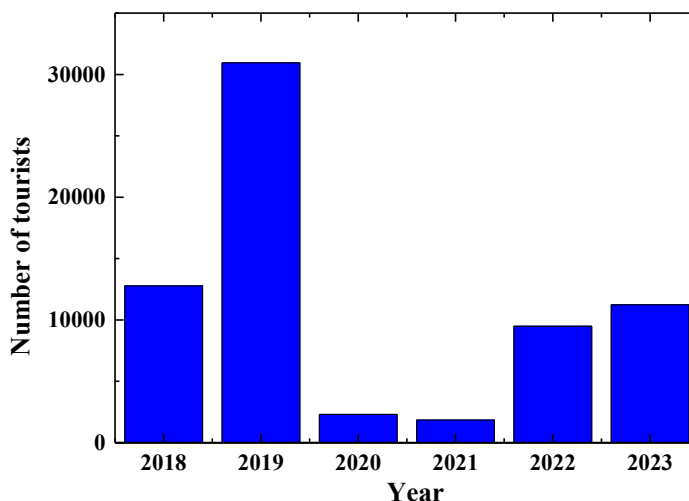


Fig. 1. Number of tourists coming to Azerbaijan in different years.

As shown in Figure 1, the number of tourists dropped sharply during the COVID19 pandemic. After the end of the pandemic, there was an increase in the number of tourists again. In 2023, the number of tourists who arrived in the country was 11,232. Among these tourists, interest in mountain tourism is even higher.

Mountain tourism can be divided into three main categories: summer tourism, winter tourism, and cultural mountain tourism. During the summer months in Azerbaijan, temperatures can soar up to 40°C, making cooler locations a more attractive option for many. In this context, alongside coastal tourism, mountain tourism becomes increasingly appealing to visitors seeking a refreshing escape from the heat. Figure 2 illustrates Azerbaijan's tourism map, highlighting key regions for mountain tourism.

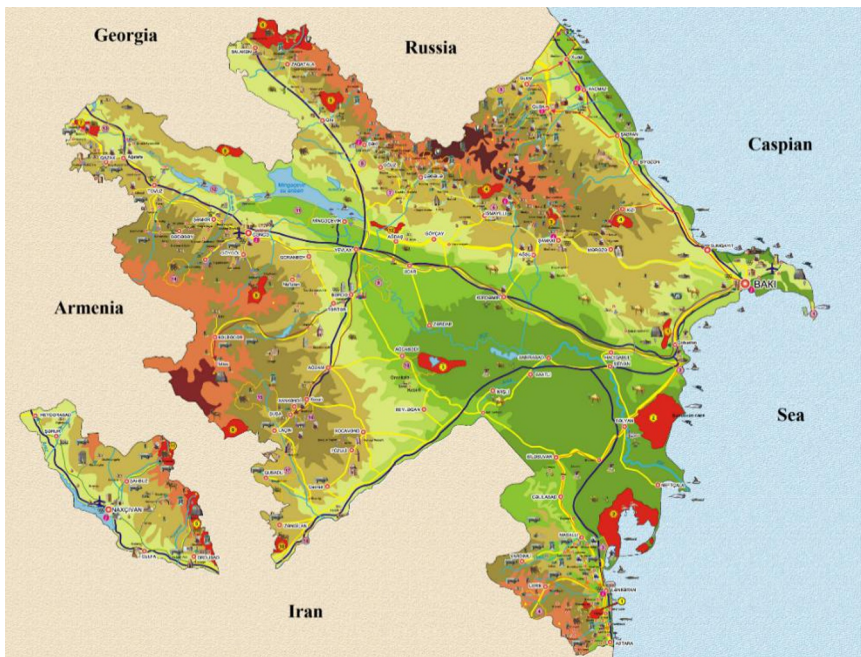


Fig. 2. Tourism map of Azerbaijan.

As seen in Figure 2, Azerbaijan's eastern region is entirely bordered by the Caspian Sea, offering vast tourism opportunities from south to north during the summer season. Significant tourism potential exists around both Lankaran in the south and Baku in the central part of the country. However, the northern area, particularly the Nabran settlement in Khachmaz district, has seen more development along the coastal tourism zones. The recreation centres established during the Soviet era have since been developed into world-class resorts. Despite this, many tourists prefer to spend their summer vacations in the mountains to escape the intense heat. Figure 1 shows that Azerbaijan also has vast opportunities for mountain tourism. In the south, Lerik district, and in the north, Quba and Gusar districts, are prime locations for mountain tourism. Notably, Khinalig village, located at an elevation of 2,180 meters above sea level, is becoming a major tourist destination. Newly constructed roads have made it easier for visitors to access these regions. Additional opportunities for mountain tourism are available in Shamakhi, Ismayilli, Gabala, Sheki, Gakh, Goygol, and Gedebey, as well as in the recently liberated regions of Shusha, Lachin, and Kalbajar. Winter tourism is another key aspect of mountain tourism development [5-7]. In many parts of Azerbaijan, including Baku, snowfall is rare, occurring only a few times a year and often for short periods, which can be disappointing for those who desire a true winter experience. People enjoy skiing and strolling

in the snow, which is why the Shahdag Winter Tourism Complex has been developed with top-notch facilities. However, due to global warming, there have been anomalies such as shorter winter seasons, and some regions have not seen snowfall in years or experienced very brief snowfalls. People living in such areas seek out winter tourism destinations to enjoy the full winter experience. As a result, many regions are actively developing winter tourism infrastructure.

A critical factor in tourism development is the cultural richness of the region. Museums, historical sites, monuments, and temples have always attracted the interest of tourists, and among these, mountain culture holds a special place. It has been observed that regions where mountain culture thrives tend to attract more visitors. For instance, Khinalig has always been a focal point for tourists. Both domestic and international visitors show great interest in this village. Mountainous areas offer unique experiences, such as breathtaking natural scenery, adrenaline-inducing pathways, and distinctive landscapes. These elements are depicted in Figure 3.



Fig. 3. Landscape of mountain tourism.

As depicted in Figure 3, the landscape showcases a stark contrast: on one side, flowers are in bloom, while on the other, snow caps the rugged peaks of cliffs. This demonstrates the ever-changing nature of mountainous regions. With such diverse natural features, different cultural practices also emerge among the people living in these areas. Handicrafts, particularly carpet weaving, are often distinctive in mountainous regions, where the patterns used reflect the thoughts and beliefs of the people. It is well-known that each design in a carpet has its meaning. These designs symbolize the people's national identity, occupation, and religious beliefs. Therefore, by studying the carpets of a particular region, one can gain insight into the values and traditions of that area. Monuments related to mountain culture are

particularly notable in this regard.

Clear goals have been set to guide the comprehensive development of tourism in Azerbaijan. One such goal is to increase the number of foreign visitors to 4 million. In the coming years, the goal is to increase the gross domestic product (GDP) generated by the accommodation and hospitality sectors, achieving an average annual growth of 20% in the tourism sector. In addition, increasing the number of domestic tourists to 6 million and turning Azerbaijan into a sustainable and affordable tourism destination are key priorities. Azerbaijan has great potential for tourism development, especially within the framework of the government's strategic focus on the non-oil sector. The regions of Azerbaijan have favorable conditions for the growth of tourism services and entrepreneurship, and with due attention, the country could earn significant income from this sector. The development of mountain tourism has become a tradition in several countries around the world. Despite the establishment of new cities and recreation centers over the years,

Mount Everest remains a popular attraction for foreign tourists. When people think of mountain tourism, they often imagine breathtaking landscapes, exciting trails and towering peaks. However, mountain culture is a more significant factor in the development of tourism. Therefore, when considering the development of tourism in any region, it is extremely important to study the cultural and historical monuments of that area. Research has shown that tourists are invariably fascinated by mountain culture among other cultural attractions [8-10].

One of the most developed regions of mountain culture in Azerbaijan is the village of Khinalig, located in the Guba region. Situated on the tops of misty mountain peaks, this village boasts a unique and breathtaking natural landscape. Figure 4 shows a general view of the village of Khinalig.



Fig. 4. General view of Khinalig village.

The village of Khinalig has its unique customs and traditions, as well as its own language. People communicate using this language. It is well-known that language is one of the main factors in the formation and development of culture. Thus, a distinctive mountain culture has developed in this village.

In the context of Azerbaijan, the role of mountain culture in tourism has been explored and analyzed in comparison with modern types of tourism. It has been shown that mountain

culture still holds significant importance when compared to new recreational centres and tourism regions equipped with modern technology.

The development of tourism also creates several anthropological issues, such as ecological problems. It seems that people carry ecological issues to the places they visit. However, mountain culture is free from these ecological problems, as everything here is naturally grown and obtained. Our research indicates that mountain tourism will further develop shortly, and tourists will show increased interest in mountain culture. Therefore, mountain culture must be studied, restored, and passed on to future generations.

4 Conclusions

The presented study examines the role of mountain culture in tourism development. As a result of economic growth, increased financial resources and advances in information technology, people's desire to engage in leisure activities has increased, as well as their choice. Therefore, in recent years, it has become necessary to identify more diverse offers that attract not only domestic tourists but also foreign guests. One of such areas is the development of mountain tourism by using mountain culture.

Research has revealed that there are extensive opportunities for the development of mountain tourism in Azerbaijan. These opportunities have been analyzed, and the village of Khinalig in the Guba region has been singled out as an illustrative example.

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