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Tashkent And The Ziyarah Trail: Evaluating The Capital's Contribution To Uzbekistan's Pilgrimage Tourism

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Abstract: Bukhara and Samarkand play crucial role in Uzbekistan's ziyarah (pilgrimage) tourism with their world famous revered scholars' shrines and mausoleums – those of Imam al Bukhari, Bahouddin Naqshband, and others. Tashkent, the capital, is typically functions as a transit hub rather than a pilgrimage destination despite hosting considerable religious and historical sites, including the Hazrati Imam Complex and the Zangi Ota Complex. This article asses Tashkent's potential to contribute to Uzbekistan's ziyarah tourism field. Having collected the information of 26 ziyarah sites and a compiled dataset of Tashkent along with tourism statistics for 2019-2025, this article argues that the capital's advantages – international air connectivity, existing visitor infrastructure, and its own concentration of sacred sites – position it not as a competitor to Bukhara ad Samarkand, but as a strategic gateway and integrative part of the national ziyarah network. The article summarizes the relevant literature, discusses the key features of ziyarah in Tashkent, highlights the city's over-representation in terms of national tourism activities, suggests some directions for positioning Tashkent within a coordinated national pilgrimage tourism strategy.

Keywords: Ziyarah tourism, pilgrimage tourism, Tashkent, Uzbekistan, Islamic tourism, Hazrati Imam, destination marketing.

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Introduction

Pilgrimage, or ziyarah, tourism has emerged as one of the most rapidly developing branches of Uzbekistan's tourism sector during the last decade, being supported with presidential decrees on domestic and pilgrimage tourism, simplified visa regimes for visitors from Muslim-majority countries, and continuous marketing through international forums such as the Tashkent International Tourism Fair. Nevertheless, most attention in this regard has been paid to Bukhara and Samarkand, which are home to the shrines of Islam's great scholars, including Imam al-Bukhari, Imam al-Maturidi, and Bahauddin Naqshband. Bukhara and Samarkand have come to represent ziyarah tourism in Uzbekistan both in the state marketing activities and academic literature[1].

In Tashkent's case, however, the city tends to be seen as the gateway city through which international pilgrims transit into the country, rather than as an actual destination for visitation purposes. It overlooks the significant religious history and sites of the city. For example, the Hazrati Imam Complex, one of the few remaining religious sites in the city of Tashkent and the Zangi Ota Complex outside the city are both recognized as places of visitation; however, neither site has attracted the same amount of academic or strategic interest as those in Bukhara and Samarkand[2].

In attempting to fill this gap in the literature, the question of this paper is simple: how should or can Tashkent contribute to Uzbekistan's ziyarah tourism industry? In answering this question, it is not being suggested that Tashkent become a competitor of Bukhara or Samarkand in terms of ziyarah. On the contrary, the capital has unique capabilities of its own that would make it very well placed to support the existing industry in Uzbekistan[3].

Academic research dedicated to ziyarah tourism in Uzbekistan has been developing consistently since the mid-2010s but is still limited to a small number of destinations and topics of discussion. The early theoretical base of the topic included a description of religious tourism in Uzbekistan as an element of the country's destination marketing strategy, where the authors noted that the Islamic legacy was a unique competitive advantage compared to other Central Asian and Muslim destinations. In particular, Navruz-Zoda and Navruz-Zoda (2016) present the concept of Sufi-based religious tourism as a concept with two functions – pilgrimage/devotional one when Sufis make pilgrimages to Sufi shrines for rituals, and the second function that includes cognitive-educational purposes of visiting these shrines by people who are not Sufis themselves, researchers or scholars interested in Sufism[4].

Further research has expanded the scope of this research avenue into issues relating to competitiveness of tourism that is oriented towards being more Muslim-friendly, analyzing the relationships between such indexes as the Global Muslim Travel Index and the growth of pilgrims' visits and the impact of halal-friendly amenities (dining, praying places, transportation). These lines of research are continued in Shakhriyrov (2026), who creates a Ziyarah Tourism Readiness Index based on the data of Global Muslim Travel Index covering the period of 2015-2025. The researcher concludes that there is no significant statistical relationship between halal-friendly services and tourism growth, but visa liberalization and transportation are more crucial factors influencing pilgrim inflows – which proves the theory of accessibility developed in this article[5]. Another earlier work by this author (Shakhriyrov, 2023) explores the history, culture, and economics of Samarkand and its ziyarah offer in order to provide a good example of how a city's pilgrimage amenities can be analyzed – which is used in this article to analyze Tashkent[6].

Another stream of literature revolves around the studies of Samarkand and Bukhara and their shrine complexes, tour route design and the economics of pilgrimage package tours. Such literature has offered practical results like designing multi-day routes of pilgrimages and the calculation of costs for those. An example is Musaev (2026), who offers the full set of pilgrimage route between Bukhara and Samarkand on the theme of Imam al-Bukhari for three days with the calculation of costs and conditions of commercial implementation of such pilgrimage package[7]. There is another line of problem-related literature that explores the constraints of the sector. In this respect, one can consider Jurakhonovich (2020) whose study covers the processes of pilgrimage tourism development in Uzbekistan and the factors and conditions of key problems of the sector. Finally, there is a smaller group of literature that has explored the development of pilgrimage in southern Uzbekistan using historiographical approaches and covering the transition period from pre-Islamic shrines to Islamic ones. One of the examples is Juraeva (2021) whose work provides the historiography of shrines of southern regions of Uzbekistan[8].

One more recent trend of research analyzes digital and accessibility-related aspects of the infrastructure of Uzbekistan's heritage tourism. Dushanova et al. (2025), discussing issues of smart and inclusive tourism in Bukhara, mention in passing that Uzbekistan's tourism policy has paid much attention to digitalization, with Tashkent and Samarkand serving as pilot cities for the implementation of e-ticketing systems and interactive maps for visitors. While this study focuses on accessibility issues in Bukhara, not Tashkent, it should be emphasized that this is one of the rare instances in the literature where the infrastructural potential of the capital is recognized – indirectly supporting the hypothesis proposed in this paper that Tashkent's digital and institutional capacities remain underutilized in ziyarah tourism[9].

At the same time, it seems that there are no works analyzing ziyarah tourism in Tashkent proper as a destination. When mentioned, it is mostly as a secondary issue related to ziyarah tourism in other parts of the country – either the point of entry into Uzbekistan, or the source of statistics on national pilgrimages published by the State Committee for Tourism Development (2024). This is consistent with the general picture in Uzbekistan's tourism literature, where Tashkent is researched in terms of an administrative and economic center but rarely as a heritage destination in its own right. This article responds

to that gap[10].

Methodology

This article draws on two original datasets compiled for this analysis, in addition to the secondary literature reviewed above.

The first is a geocoded inventory of 26 ziyarah-relevant sites across Tashkent City and Tashkent Region, compiled from field identification and cross-referenced coordinates. Each site was classified into one of three scope tiers by great-circle (haversine) distance from the Hazrati Imam Complex, taken as the city's historic religious and geographic reference point: a "city core" tier (≤ 15 km), a "near region" tier (15–40 km), and a "far region" tier (> 40 km). This classification, reported in Table 1, shows that 15 of the 26 sites fall within the city core, 4 in the near region — including both sites in Zangiota district — and 7 in the far region (Bekobod and Bo'ka districts, 58–118 km from the city center). The far-region sites are reported for completeness but are treated as a distinct, wider regional pilgrimage network rather than as part of the compact capital-based circuit that is this article's primary subject.

The second dataset is a compiled time series of Tashkent City and Tashkent Region tourism statistics for 2019–2025, drawn primarily from Tashkent Region Department of Statistics press releases and National Statistics Committee tourism publications, supplemented by one secondary news source (kapital.uz, citing the Tashkent City Hokimiyat) for 2024 city-level arrival and revenue figures. Compiling this dataset surfaced several data-quality issues in the underlying bulletins that are directly relevant to the argument developed in Section 6: geographic scope (city vs. region) is not consistently stated across all indicators and years; a small number of figures for the same year and geography conflict between chart and narrative sources (most notably 2020 tourism-firm counts, reported as both 6 and 229 in different parts of the same bulletin); and pilgrimage-purpose visitation is disaggregated in only three years of the available data (2019, 2020, 2021), each on a seemingly different basis, precluding a reliable multi-year trend. These figures are reported in Sections 5 and 6 with their limitations stated explicitly, rather than smoothed into a single series.

Results And Discussion

Tashkent's Ziyarah Assets

Although Tashkent has a contemporary administrative vibe, it still possesses several locations with recognized historical and religious importance, laying the groundwork for a legitimate, albeit underdeveloped, ziyarah tourism experience. Table 1 presents the complete inventory of 26 sites gathered for this research.

The Hazrati Imam Complex is often seen as the spiritual core of ancient Tashkent. Situated in the ancient Old City, the complex features multiple mosques, madrasahs, and a library that contains rare Islamic manuscripts. It is linked to the gravesite of a respected early Islamic scholar and currently serves as the headquarters of Uzbekistan's Muslim Board, endowing it with both religious and organizational importance[11].

The Zangi Ota Complex, located in the Zangiota district on the southern edge of the city (17.0 km from the Hazrati Imam Complex according to the measurement method in this article), serves as the burial place of a Sufi sheikh from the twelfth century and his spouse, Anbar Bibi. The complex has historically functioned as a location for local and regional pilgrimage and continues to hold an active devotional role, unlike the more museum-like displays seen at certain shrine complexes in other parts of the country[12].

An additional 13 locations — smaller mausoleums, mosques, and madrasahs — are included in the city-core category along with the Hazrati Imam Complex, presenting more opportunities for route enhancement, interpretative infrastructure, signage, and visitor amenities. Three more locations in the nearby region tier (Sadir Ota, Said Muhammad Vali, and Axtam Sahoba) are situated within a 15–33 km range and could realistically be included in an expanded route.

Collectively, these assets indicate that Tashkent's constraint is not the lack of pilgrimage heritage, but rather the deficiency in strategic packaging, marketing, and integration into the national ziyarah tourism offering[13].

Table 1. Tashkent-area ziyarah sites by administrative area, district, and distance from the Hazrati Imam Complex (own compilation).

No	Site	Admin. Area	District	Lat.	Long.	Dist. from Hazrati Imam (km)	Scope Tier
1	Hazrati Imam Complex	Tashkent City	Olmazor	41.3374	69.2394	0.0	City core
2	Shayx Xovandi Tohur (Shayxontohur)	Tashkent City	Shayxontohur	41.3070	69.2550	3.6	City core
3	Xo'ja Allambardor Complex	Tashkent City	Chilonzor	41.3058	69.2301	3.6	City core
4	Suzuk Ota Complex	Tashkent City	Shayxontohur	41.3180	69.2243	2.5	City core
5	Shayx M. S. M. Yusuf Complex	Tashkent City	Chilonzor	41.2593	69.1864	9.7	City core
6	Xayrobod Eshon Complex	Tashkent City	Chilonzor	41.2758	69.1951	7.8	City core
7	Islom Ota Mosque	Tashkent City	Yashnobod	41.2771	69.3094	8.9	City core
8	Minor Mosque	Tashkent City	Yunusobod	41.3353	69.2751	3.0	City core
9	Orifjonboy Mosque	Tashkent City	Tashkent City (center)	41.3364	69.2595	1.7	City core
10	Xo'ja Axror Vali Mosque	Tashkent City	Shayxontohur	41.3238	69.2377	1.5	City core
11	Abulqosim Madrasah	Tashkent City	Chilonzor	41.3068	69.2400	3.4	City core
12	Ko'kaldosh Madrasah	Tashkent City	Shayxontohur	41.3233	69.2358	1.6	City core
13	Qo'yliq Ota Mausoleum	Tashkent City	Bektemir	41.2389	69.3219	12.9	City core
14	Muin Xalfa Bobo Mausoleum	Tashkent City	Olmazor	41.3370	69.2403	0.1	City core
15	Shayx Zayniddin Bobo Mausoleum	Tashkent City	Shayxontohur	41.3227	69.2048	3.3	City core
16	Zangi Ota Complex (incl. Anbar Bibi)	Tashkent Region	Zangiota	41.1968	69.1585	17.0	Near region
17	Sadir Ota	Tashkent Region	Zangiota	41.2286	69.1197	15.7	Near region
18	Xatib Ota	Tashkent Region	Bekobod	40.2766	69.2012	118.0	Far region
19	Anjirli Ota	Tashkent Region	Bekobod	40.2739	69.1979	118.3	Far region
20	Qavs Ota	Tashkent Region	Bekobod	40.2790	69.1859	117.8	Far region
21	Buzruk Ota	Tashkent Region	Bekobod	40.3945	69.2328	104.8	Far region
22	Xo'ja Zunnun Ota & G'oyib Ota	Tashkent Region	Bo'ka	40.7477	69.1430	66.1	Far region
23	G'ubur Ota	Tashkent Region	Bo'ka	40.7940	69.2578	60.4	Far region
24	Hazrati Rushnoy Xo'ja Buva	Tashkent Region	Bo'ka	40.8100	69.2541	58.7	Far region

No	Site	Admin. Area	District	Lat.	Long.	Dist. from Hazrati Imam (km)	Scope Tier
25	Axtam Sahoba	Tashkent Region	Nurafshon	41.0502	69.3538	33.3	Near region
26	Said Muhammad Vali	Tashkent Region	O'rtachirchiq	41.0990	69.3335	27.7	Near region

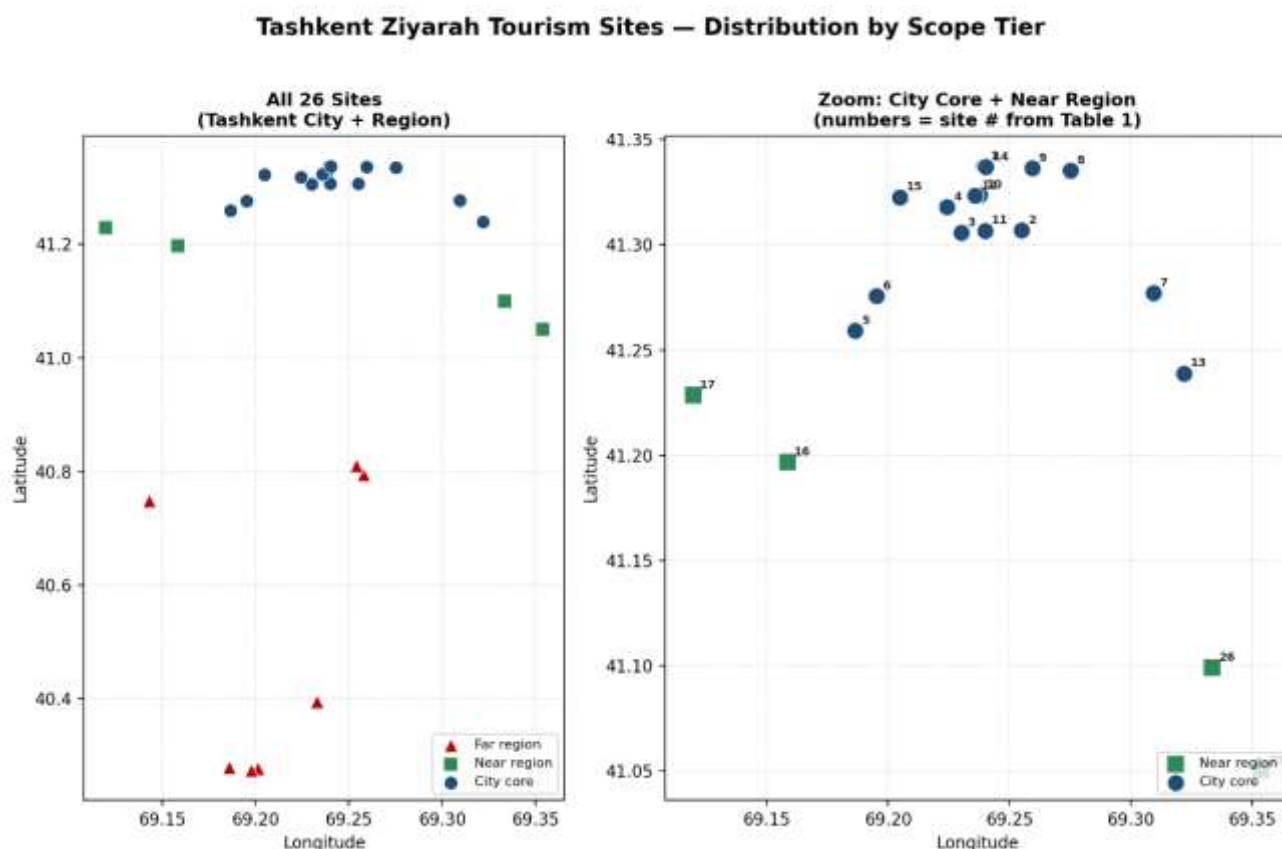


Figure 1. Spatial distribution of the 26 Tashkent-area ziyarah sites by scope tier, classified by great-circle distance from the Hazrati Imam Complex (left: full extent across Tashkent City and Region; right: detail of the city-core and near-region cluster, numbered per Table 1).

5. Tashkent's Comparative Position: Gateway, Not Rival

Tashkent's main advantage is not in competing with Bukhara and Samarkand for the scale or fame of its monuments, but in serving as the nation's foremost international gateway and holding a significant portion of the national tourism market. In 2024, Tashkent City recorded 4.05 million foreign tourist arrivals and hosted 7.2 million domestic tourists, resulting in an estimated \$1.4 billion in tourism services exports (Tashkent City Hokimiyat, referenced in kapital.uz, 2024) — statistics that, although sourced from a secondary news outlet instead of a primary statistical report, align with the capital's unequal portion of national tourism infrastructure noted in official figures. According to Figure 2, in 2024, Tashkent City represented 52.5% of all registered tourism firms and organizations in Uzbekistan, 63.0% of sold tourist packages, and 35–44% of hotel establishments, rooms, beds, and accommodated visitors—significantly surpassing the Tashkent Region's single-digit percentages across all metrics (National Statistics Committee, 2024)[14].

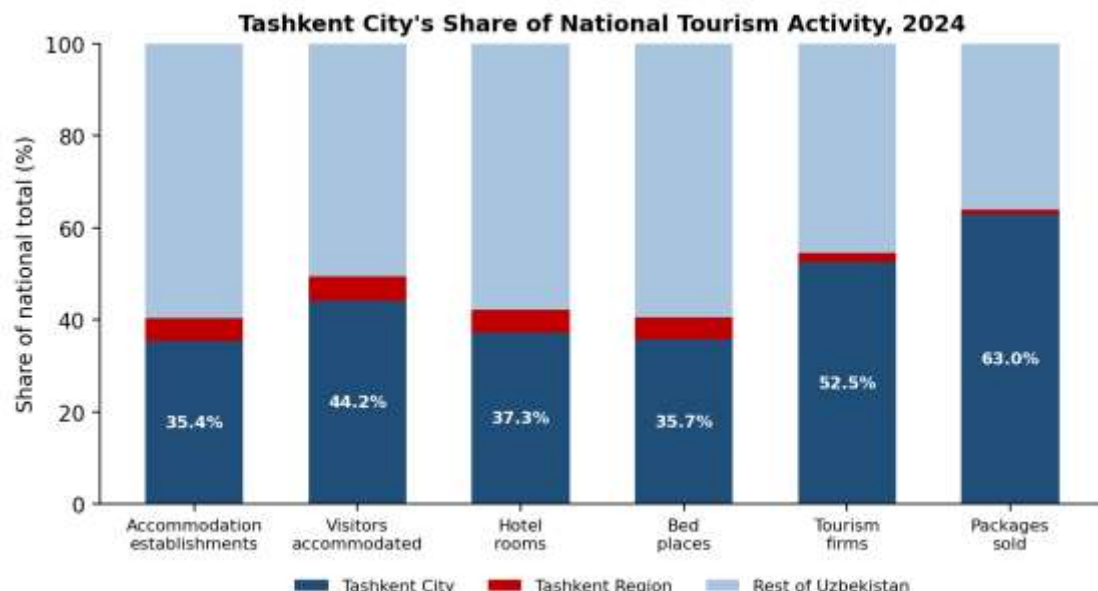


Figure 2. Tashkent City's share of national tourism activity by indicator, 2024 (National Statistics Committee, 2024).

This focus gives the capital a group of people who are always there and come in large numbers but right now they are not visiting as part of a ziyarah trip. It sets up Tashkent to have three jobs in a national ziyarah plan:

- An introduction and welcome part, where people can learn about the religious and history background of their trip in Uzbekistan before going to Bukhara, Samarkand or other places.
- A quick visit spot, for people who do not have time and can not go beyond the capital. It is based on the Hazrati Imam Complex and the Zangi Ota Complex making a trip that takes half a day or a full day using the 15 sites in the center of the city listed in Table 1.
- A center for services providing food that is halal places to pray places to stay and transport that helps people who are traveling for ziyarah no matter which holy cities they end up visiting.

Changing how Tashkent is seen in this way stops it from doing the thing as the holy cities, like Bukhara and Samarkand while also filling a real need. The city's current buildings and the people coming there are not being used much as they could be[15].

Challenges

There are some problems that stop Tashkent from being a big part of ziyarah tourism.

- Tashkent is rarely seen as a part of the branding. When the tourism industry talk about ziyarah tourism they mostly talk about Bukhara and Samarkand. Tashkent's sites are not usually shown as attractions in the marketing materials for pilgrimages.
- We do not have data about the people who visit Tashkents sites for pilgrimage. The numbers of visitors to Tashkents sites are not always separated from the numbers of tourists. This makes it hard to know how many people are really visiting Tashkent for ziyarah tourism. It is also hard to make a case for investing in ziyarah tourism in Tashkent. For example when we were gathering data for this article we found that the numbers of people visiting Tashkent for pilgrimage were only reported for three out of the seven years we looked at. In 2019 there were 11,600 visitors. In 2020 there were 7,500 visitors. In 2021 there were 4,104 visitors.. The way these numbers were calculated was different each time.. Sometimes the numbers did not even match up. These numbers do not really show a trend. They just show that we do not have data.

Policy Recommendations

The people in charge of tourism in Tashkent should think about these five things:

- They should make a Tashkent ziyarah circuit. This would be a day or full-day trip that takes people to the Hazrati Imam Complex, Zangi Ota Complex and the other 13 important sites in the city that are listed in Table 1. They should plan out the trip. Figure out how much it will cost and how to get people from one place to another.

They can look at what they did for the Bukhara–Samarkand pilgrimage routes.

- They should tell people about Tashkent when they are talking about ziyarah trips in the country. When they are making websites going to tourism fairs and working with companies that help people plan trips they should make sure to include Tashkent's sites. They should not just think of Tashkent as a place to stop on the way to else.
- They should keep track of how many people visit Tashkent's sites. The State Committee for Tourism Development should count the number of people who come to Tashkent's sites just for ziyarah trips. They should not mix this up with the number of people who come to Tashkent for reasons. They should always define what they mean by "Tashkent". Use the same definition every year. This will help them make decisions about where to put their money and see if the number of visitors is going up or down. Tashkent ziyarah trips are important. The people, in charge of tourism should pay attention to Tashkents ziyarah sites.

Conclusion

Tashkent has a lot to offer to Uzbekistans ziyarah tourism. It is often overlooked. This is because people pay attention to Bukhara and Samarkand.. Tashkent has some great pilgrimage sites like the Hazrati Imam Complex and the Zangi Ota Complex. Also Tashkent is the place where people arrive from other countries and it has a lot of tourism infrastructure. This is something that Bukhara and Samarkand do not have.

Of trying to compete with Bukhara and Samarkand Tashkent can be a gateway for people visiting Uzbekistans ziyarah tourism. It can help people get ready for their trip and provide them with the services they need. To make this happen Uzbekistans ziyarah tourism needs to be planned. This includes creating routes, advertising, collecting data and building things that visitors need. If this is done Tashkent can play an active role, in Uzbekistans pilgrimage tourism economy. It can help make Uzbekistans ziyarah tourism better.

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