

CULTURAL TOURISM AND ITS ECONOMIC IMPACT IN THE KARABAKH AND EAST ZANGEZUR ECONOMIC REGIONS

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Abstract

Karabakh and East Zangezur are among the most historically, culturally, and naturally rich regions of Azerbaijan. For centuries, these territories have served as important centers of culture and trade in the Caucasus, distinguished by their architectural monuments, ancient cities, and breathtaking landscapes. The heritage of the Karabakh Khanate, cultural capital cities such as Shusha, and the ongoing reconstruction efforts in Fuzuli, Zangilan, and Gubadli play a vital role in the region's future development. Meanwhile, East Zangezur, with its strategic location and abundant natural resources, strengthens Azerbaijan's economic and ecological potential.

Keywords: tourism sector, culture, cultural tourism, cultural heritage, architecture, monuments, economy

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Introduction:

Karabakh is one of the oldest historical regions of Azerbaijan. In 1968, remains of ancient humans were found in the Azikh cave located in the territory of Karabakh. It is believed that people lived in this area 250-300 thousand years ago. The rich nature and natural resources of these ancient lands have always been in the spotlight.

Unfortunately, as a result of nearly 30 years of occupation, all our resources in these territories have been exploited and plundered. The enemy has not refrained from their disgusting deeds by appropriating everything for themselves. The cultural centers, museums, and historical monuments here have been destroyed, demolished, and valuable items with ancient history have been taken out of our country. The occupying regime conducted illegal archaeological excavations in various regions of Karabakh until the last days of the Second Karabakh War, and the discovered artifacts were taken to Armenia. Our historical and cultural monuments have been plundered, all infrastructure has been destroyed, mosques considered ancient architectural monuments and their minarets have been brutally demolished, and shrines have been devastated.

Despite all these destructions and material and spiritual losses, our state is also engaged in the restoration of our religious, historical, and cultural monuments that have been exposed to barbarism. The cultural construction activities that began in Shusha, considered the cradle of culture in Karabakh, will continue in other regions as well. In a short period of time, the tomb of Vagif, the bust of Vagif were reopened, the monument to Uzeyir Hajibeyli was reinstalled, the restoration of Uzeyir Hajibeyli's destroyed house has been initiated, the opening of Bulbul's house museum has taken place, and the

Natavan spring has been restored. Under the direction of President Ilham Aliyev, the busts of our great personalities — Natavan, Uzeyir Hajibeyli, and Bulbul, who were gunned down by Armenians, were brought and placed in the central square. Restoration and repair work has begun in three mosques, and Vagif Poetry Days and the "Kharibulbul" festival have also been restored. The role of the Heydar Aliyev Foundation in the restoration of all these cultural activities is undeniable. In a short period of time, the "Karabakh" and "Kharibulbul" hotels in Shusha have been put into operation. The construction of three airports in Karabakh is not a coincidence either. Fuzuli Airport has already begun operations, and the commencement of operations at Zangilan and Lachin airports is also not excluded in the near future. This will facilitate easier and more comfortable travel for both local and foreign tourists wishing to visit Shusha, which is considered the pearl of Karabakh and Azerbaijan's cultural capital, as well as for those heading to the enchanting nature and ecotourism opportunities of Kalbajar and the Istisu resort using these airports.

The tourism potential of Karabakh is notably rich, offering diverse tourism types such as ecotourism, mountain tourism, winter tourism, hunting tourism, and health tourism. The State Tourism Agency has developed a tourism development strategy and concept for the territories liberated from occupation. In Kalbajar, there are opportunities for the development of winter and health tourism alongside traditional tourism. In Shusha, regarded as a cultural cradle, festivals are primarily planned, while Agdam is set to showcase the stark consequences of occupation and facilitate business tourism. The Khojavend region also possesses significant tourism potential. It is more suitable to include Tugh and Hadrut in the wine route. The famous Azikh and Taglar caves are located in this area. Plans are also in place concerning Sugovushan.

This historically rich region of Azerbaijan will attract tourists with its flora and fauna, cuisine, historical and cultural-religious monuments, ancient fortresses, bridges, forests, springs, and various scenic sites. Karabakh, abundant in natural resources, also offers the possibility of organizing various extreme, agritourism, and green tourism activities. All these factors create vast perspectives for tourism development. Kalbajar is an ideal location for winter tourism. Establishing tourism infrastructure in a mutually beneficial way in our liberated territories is crucial. Shusha will emerge as one of the symbolic cities of Azerbaijani tourism. The historical monuments and distinctive architecture of Shusha will enable the creation of new tourism routes.

The therapeutic mineral spring of Ilisu in Lachin, characterized by extensive recreational prospects, alongside the rich flora and fauna of the Lachin reserve, which spans more than 21,000 hectares, will broaden the tourism opportunities in these areas. Before the occupation, two significant sanatoriums operated in the Istisu settlement of Kalbajar, treating and accommodating 50,000 individuals annually. The "Istisu" mineral waters were recognized for their efficacy in treating both external and internal ailments. Additionally, a resort and mineral water bottling plant had been established there. Experts believe that the terrain of Kalbajar allows for the construction of the most remarkable cable cars in the world and the establishment of compelling tourism services. There is potential to develop the largest tourism center in the Caucasus here in the future.

Simultaneously, the "Caucasian Albania Tourism Route" will play a vital role in exposing the Armenian fabrications that distort the history of Karabakh. The route is being developed based on the advice and recommendations of scholars researching Caucasian Albania. The Albanian culture route encompasses three main corridors of Azerbaijan—Baku-Shaki-Zagatala, Ganja-Qazakh, and Karabakh. Traces of Albanian culture are more prevalent in Karabakh and East Zangezur. This region possesses a rich heritage related to Caucasian Albania, including temples, churches, and various traditions. It is noteworthy that the tourism route emerging along the traces of ancient Albanian culture will significantly contribute to promoting the rich historical tourism potential of our country, as well as Karabakh.

Methods. Efforts are underway to establish the necessary tourism infrastructure to introduce Karabakh's existing tourism potential. It is important to emphasize that tourism encompasses not only its economic aspects but also its promotional dimension. Tourists will have the opportunity to relax in

Karabakh, enjoying the beauty of nature, our cultural-historical monuments, and the created conducive environment, as well as becoming acquainted with certain structures that will serve as exhibits to demonstrate the consequences of occupation in areas such as Agdam, Jabrail, and Fuzuli, thereby witnessing firsthand the devastation wrought by Armenian aggression and how the rightful owners are now fostering revival.

The introduction of new airline routes could stimulate economic growth by enhancing tourism infrastructure in the region. Businesses such as hotels, restaurants, local travel agencies, and various service sectors may expand in response to an increase in tourist traffic. This will strengthen the local economy, create jobs, and boost revenues. If Fuzuli International Airport plans to accommodate international flights in the future, it could facilitate the arrival of foreign tourists to Karabakh. When combined with measures taken by the state to promote Azerbaijan's tourism potential on an international scale, such as branding campaigns like "Azerbaijan – Land of Fire," the attractiveness of the region will significantly increase.

Tourist visits can enhance the understanding of local culture, traditions, and history, thereby fostering interest in the reconstruction and restoration processes occurring in the region and supporting social unity. It has the potential to transform Karabakh and East Zangezur into a tourism hub, catalyzing the creation of new routes for both domestic and international tourists. Prioritizing sustainable tourism practices is crucial to minimize the ecological impact of tourism.

Karabakh possesses significant potential for the development of health tourism, in addition to cultural tourism. A specialized plan and strategy should be developed and implemented expeditiously.

Discussion and analysis. Document Analysis: Analysis of reports from state statistical agencies, tourism plans, and information from international organizations. Field Research: Site visits, interviews, and surveys conducted at tourism attractions in the Karabakh and East Zangezur regions. Qualitative and Quantitative Analysis: Statistical processing of collected data and assessment of tourism potential. Comparative Analysis: Comparison with tourism strategies of other regions.

Strategic Partnerships with Travel Agencies. Collaboration with local and international agencies is essential in promoting the tourism potential of Karabakh and East Zangezur. This collaboration should not only involve local travel agencies operating within Azerbaijan but also extend to international tourism networks, which is particularly effective in attracting foreign tourists. Offering attractive commission rates or exclusive packages to agencies can increase their interest in promoting tours to Karabakh and East Zangezur. Training programs should also be conducted for agency staff concerning the region's history, culture, and tourism opportunities, enabling them to provide more comprehensive information to clients.

Creating Attractive Tourism Products. Themed tour packages. Prepare tour packages targeting different segments such as cultural tourism (historical monuments, museums), ecotourism (natural parks, hiking trails), adventure tourism (mountain hikes, off-road tours) or culinary tours.

Combined routes: Offer multi-day tours connecting Karabakh and East Zangezur with other touristic regions of Azerbaijan (Baku, Ganja, Guba). For example, the "Karabakh–East Zangezur–Baku" route.[7]

Individual and group tours: Organize personalized tours for individual travelers and families, as well as special group tours for educational institutions or corporate groups.

Integration with Digital Platforms. Online Sales Channels. Adding special sections for Karabakh and East Zangezur tours to travel agencies' websites and mobile applications. This would allow customers to easily choose a tour. Social Media and Influencers: Travel agencies can collaborate with influencers on social media platforms to promote the tourism potential of the region. In addition, agencies can share posts on their own social media accounts highlighting the visual appeal of Karabakh and East Zangezur.

Reservation Systems: Integrating Karabakh tours into the online reservation platforms used by agencies, for example, increasing sales through "Booking.com" or local platforms. Collaboration with Local Communities. Local guides and service providers. Travel agencies can collaborate with local guides, craftsmen, and small businesses (such as restaurants and souvenir shops) to offer authentic experiences. This also supports the local economy.

Integration into cultural events: Including festivals, exhibitions, or other cultural events held in the region in tour packages can increase tourists’ interest.

Promotion and Marketing Strategies. Discount Campaigns: Offer seasonal discounts, family packages, or early booking bonuses to attract domestic tourists. Promotional Materials: Prepare brochures, videos, and virtual tours introducing the tourist attractions of Karabakh and East Zangazur for travel agencies. These materials can be distributed in agency offices and on online platforms. State-Supported Campaigns: Organize branded campaigns such as “Travel to Karabakh” in cooperation with the State Tourism Agency of Azerbaijan and involve travel agencies in these initiatives.

Quality Assurance and Customer Satisfaction. Standardized Services: To maintain the quality and reliability of tour operations provided by travel agencies, unified service standards should be established and subject to regular monitoring and evaluation. The implementation of these standards ensures consistency across different tour packages and enhances the overall competitiveness of the tourism sector. Feedback Mechanism: A systematic feedback mechanism should be developed to collect customer reviews and assess satisfaction levels. The analysis of this feedback will facilitate the continuous improvement of tourism products and services, contributing to the enhancement of agency reputation and the strengthening of customer loyalty. Safety Measures: Given that tourism activities are being reintroduced in the regions of Karabakh and East Zangazur, it is essential to design comprehensive safety protocols and provide specialized guidance to travel agencies. Ensuring the safety and well-being of tourists is a fundamental prerequisite for the sustainable development of these destinations.

Table 1.
Key Tourism Development Directions in Karabakh and East Zangezur

Tourism Type	Example Areas / Activities	Development Potential	Key Benefits
Cultural Tourism	Shusha, Agdam (museums, monuments, festivals)	Very High	Preservation of heritage, education
Ecotourism	Kalbajar, Lachin, Tartar (mountain trails, reserves)	High	Sustainable travel, local livelihoods
Health Tourism	Istisu, Ilisu mineral springs	Very High	Health recovery, spa tourism
Adventure Tourism	Hiking, off-road, cable cars in Kalbajar & Lachin	Medium–High	Youth engagement, diversity in tourism
Business Tourism	Agdam, Fuzuli (conferences, reconstruction exhibitions)	Medium	Economic growth, investment attraction

The following chart illustrates the estimated share of tourism directions in the development strategy of Karabakh and East Zangezur:

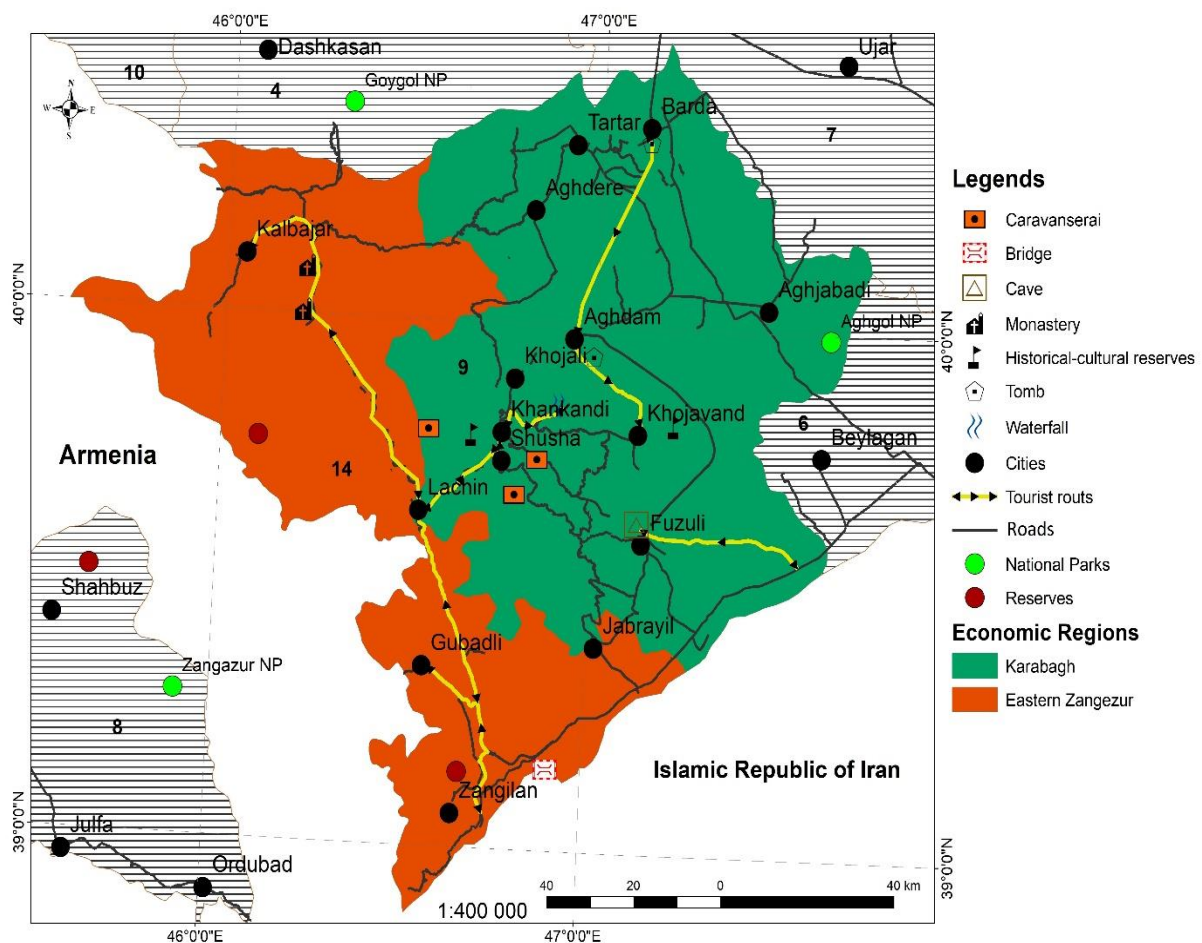
- Cultural Tourism – 30%
- Health Tourism – 25%
- Ecotourism – 20%

- Adventure Tourism – 15%
- Business Tourism – 10%

Cultural and health tourism are projected to play the dominant role in the initial stage of regional development, followed by ecotourism and adventure tourism as infrastructure expands. [10]

Special Measures to Stimulate Domestic Tourism. Educational Tours: Organizing educational trips aimed at familiarizing young people with the historical and cultural heritage of Karabakh. Travel agencies may collaborate with schools and universities to implement these programs, thereby fostering national awareness and cultural appreciation among students. Corporate Tours: Developing tour packages for companies that focus on team-building and recreational activities, particularly by utilizing the region's rich natural landscapes. Such initiatives can enhance employee motivation and promote the diversification of tourism offerings. Affordable Tour Packages: Designing budget-friendly travel options for low- and middle-income citizens is essential for increasing the inclusivity and mass participation in domestic tourism. These initiatives contribute to broader social engagement and ensure the accessibility of tourism for all segments of society.

Logistical and Infrastructure Support. Transportation Integration: To enhance connectivity and facilitate seamless travel experiences, local transportation services should be synchronized with flights to the Fuzuli, Zangilan, and Lachin airports. Travel agencies are expected to ensure efficient ground transportation, enabling tourists to reach hotels and key tourist destinations comfortably and on schedule. This integration of air and ground transport networks is a critical component in improving accessibility and overall service quality within the regional tourism infrastructure.



The presented map illustrates the overall geographical distribution of tourism sites, historical and cultural monuments, natural resources, and tourism routes within the Karabakh and Eastern Zangezur

economic regions. On the map, the Karabakh economic region is shown in green, while the Eastern Zangezur economic region is depicted in purple. These regions border Armenia to the west, the Islamic Republic of Iran to the south, and other economic regions of Azerbaijan to the north and east.

This route encompasses the richest cultural and historical heritage of the Karabakh and Eastern Zangezur regions. The city of Shusha serves as the starting point of the route and is considered the cradle of Azerbaijani music and architecture. Notable sites in Shusha include the Upper Govhar Agha Mosque, Natavan's House, the Karabakh Khan Palace, Shusha Fortress, the Khurshidbanu Natavan Spring, the Seven Gates Monastery, the Mausoleum of Molla Panah Vagif, Shusha Cave Camp, the House Museum of Uzeyir Hajibeyov, Bulbul's House Museum, the Caravanserai of Agha Gahraman Mir Siyab, the Tower of Gara Boyuk Khan, the two-story caravanserai, and the Ghazanchi Church.

Proceeding towards the Lachin district, ancient bridges, caravanserais, and mausoleums in the villages of Gorchlu and Minkend attract attention. Cultural heritage in Lachin includes the Agoqlan Monastery, the Mausoleum of Malik Ajdar, the Demirovlu Pir Temple, the Hamza Sultan Palace, and the Children's Castle. The final point of the route is the Kalbajar district, which features the Khudavang and Ganjasar Monasteries, Istisu mineral springs, natural waterfalls and caves, as well as the Lex Fortress. This route holds significant importance for cultural, natural, and religious tourism.

Kalbajar – Lachin – Qubadli – Zangilan Route (Cultural, Religious, and Natural Pilgrimage Tourism Route). This route covers the central economic areas of the Karabakh and Eastern Zangezur economic regions and is primarily organized around historical-architectural monuments and restored urban spaces. In Kalbajar, the Khudavang and Ganjasar Monasteries serve as the main sites for religious tourism. While proceeding towards the Lachin district, travelers can encounter both natural attractions and numerous nationally significant monuments. The natural landscape of Qubadli is particularly distinct, featuring sites such as Madat Spring, Shirin Spring, Topagachi Mountain, and Qurbantepe Mountain. In addition, Qubadli is rich in cultural and historical heritage, including the Ancient Harami Cemetery, Boyunagar Mausoleum, Imamzadeh (Cilfir), the Mir Sadi Agha Shrine, Agh Hasar Pir, Mirmehdi Agha Pir, Safara Baba Pir, Salahli Pir, Imamzadeh, Lalezar Bridge, Goy Fortress, "Qalali" Fortress (with underground passages), Maiden Tower, Kalacha, Bridge, Kara Kaya Shelter, Stone Chest, the Boy-Girl Monument, and the Koroglu Fortress. Visits to Zangilan allow exploration of the Agbend, Minjivan, and Imam Zaman Village Mosques, as well as the Seqqizgushali Mausoleum, Ziya Baba Shrine, Khanazur Mausoleum, Sharifan Monuments, Qasr Fortress, and Sharifan Crypt. Additionally, natural tourism attractions in Zangilan can be explored, including the Alibeyli Park, the newly established Agaly Village, Qotursu Spring, Zafar Park, Bartaz Mountain, and Agoyuq Plain, among others. This route thus holds significant importance for cultural, religious, and natural tourism, offering a comprehensive experience of the region's historical, architectural, and natural heritage.

Barda – Aghdam – Khojavend Route (Religious and Cultural Heritage Tourism Route). This route is recognized as a unique tourism corridor connecting the Western Karabakh and Aran regions. Historical monuments in Barda attract significant attention from both domestic and international tourists. Key sites include the Barda Mausoleum (built in 1322), remnants of ancient city walls dating back to the 6th century, the Ibrahim Mosque of the 18th century, two bridges over the Tartar River from the 7th–9th centuries, the Ahsadan Baba Mausoleum of the 14th century, and the 18th–19th-century bathhouse in Shirvanli village, among other landmarks. One of the most visited sites in Barda is the History and Ethnography Museum, which exhibits over 2,200 artifacts representing the city's history and culture, including a scale model of the ancient city. Many of these exhibits were discovered during archaeological excavations. Tourists visiting Barda also witness the region's recent socio-economic development, successful economic policies, state programs for regional development, infrastructure modernization, and large-scale reconstruction and construction projects. Newly built landmarks, such as the Heydar Aliyev Center, music and art school buildings, Heydar Aliyev Park-Boulevard, Heroes Park, and the magnificent Flag Square, further enhance the city's historical charm. Aghdam, located in west-

ern Azerbaijan, is one of the country's most strategically significant cities. Renowned for both its natural beauty and richness in cultural heritage, Aghdam features the Aghdam Juma Mosque, Aghdam Bread Museum, Panahali Khan's fortress in Aghdam, numerous shrines, mosques, temples, residences, caravanserais, the 17th-century tower, Hatem Malik Fortress, 15th-century crypt, Chirag Tepe settlement, and various archaeological sites.

Khojavend district hosts the Azikh Cave, a site of both historical and paleontological significance. The village of Tug, located at the foothills of the Karabakh mountain range, is one of the historical settlements reflecting Azerbaijan's rich past. Situated near the Paleolithic camps of Azikh and Taghlar caves, Tug village contains several early medieval Albanian temples, attracting considerable scholarly and tourist interest. Historically, Tug was also a regional center of education and culture. The Tug Village School, one of Azerbaijan's first modern-type educational institutions in the 19th–20th centuries, produced numerous notable figures and was founded by the prominent scholar and author of *Kitabi-tarixi-Qarabagh*, Mirmehdi Khazani (1819–1894). The historical section of Tug village preserves traditional Karabakh architectural styles, including residential houses, spring structures, chest-type tombs, and temples. Tug is also rich in natural and ecological resources. To preserve its distinctive architectural style and promote it as a cultural tourism destination, the "Tug" State Historical-Cultural and Natural Reserve was established on 16 June 2023. Situated at the transition from the Aran lowlands to the mountainous zone of Karabakh, Tug serves as an important tourism destination along the Shusha route, showcasing the region's scenic landscapes. Recognized for viticulture, Tug produces wines from grapes harvested in Khojavend and Fuzuli districts.

In addition to cultural and historical sites, Tug village and the surrounding area host several Albanian temples, historical bridges, manors, ancient springs, and vaulted bridges dating from the early to late medieval periods. The Azikh Cave, located five kilometers from Tug village in a picturesque part of Karabakh, brought Azerbaijan to global attention as an ancient human settlement. Archaeological excavations conducted in 1968 revealed a lower jawbone belonging to early humans, approximately 350,000–400,000 years old. Azikh Cave is therefore considered a site of international archaeological significance. Other heritage sites along the route include Taghlar Cave, Taghly Bridge, the Church of St. John, and the Ktishveng Monastery Complex. Overall, this route holds considerable importance for both pilgrimage and cultural-educational tourism, providing an integrated experience of Azerbaijan's historical, religious, and natural heritage.

Logistical and Infrastructure Support for Regional Tourism Development. Transportation Integration. The establishment of an efficient and integrated transportation network is a crucial prerequisite for the sustainable development of regional tourism. In the context of Karabakh and East Zangazur, the synchronization of local transportation services with flight schedules to Fuzuli, Zangilan, and Lachin airports is of strategic importance. Such coordination ensures the smooth mobility of tourists from airports to accommodation facilities and major tourist destinations. [8]

Travel agencies play a pivotal role in this process, as they are responsible for organizing comprehensive ground transportation services that guarantee comfort, punctuality, and safety. The development of multimodal transport connections not only enhances the overall accessibility of the region but also contributes to improving the perceived quality of the tourism experience.

Furthermore, the integration of air and ground transport systems aligns with broader national objectives aimed at strengthening tourism infrastructure, facilitating regional mobility, and promoting the socio-economic revitalization of post-conflict areas. Therefore, logistical planning should be regarded as a key strategic dimension in the long-term framework of tourism development in Karabakh and East Zangazur.

Conclusion:

Karabakh and East Zangezur are poised to become the cultural and tourism hub of Azerbaijan, symbolizing resilience, national revival, and the harmonious coexistence of history, nature, and modernity.

1. The revival of historical and cultural monuments, organization of cultural events such as the “Kharibulbul” festival, and restoration of Shusha’s architectural heritage are clear indicators of Azerbaijan’s commitment to preserving national identity while fostering sustainable tourism. The establishment of modern infrastructure—including airports, roads, and hotels—further enhances the accessibility and attractiveness of the region.
2. Collaboration with local communities, implementation of digital marketing strategies, and development of diversified tour packages will ensure long-term competitiveness and inclusivity. Additionally, the integration of sustainable tourism principles will minimize environmental impacts and contribute to the balanced development of local economies.
3. The comprehensive analysis of tourism development in the Karabakh and East Zangezur economic regions highlights the significant potential of these territories to become major cultural, ecological, and health tourism destinations in the South Caucasus. The ongoing restoration and reconstruction efforts, combined with strategic state policies, have created favorable conditions for both domestic and international tourism growth.

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