

Towards a Competitive MICE Tourism Ecosystem in Uzbekistan: Organizational and Economic Perspectives

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Abstract: Meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions (MICE) tourism has emerged as one of the most valuable and resilient segments of the global visitor economy, generating higher per-capita spending, filling off-peak seasonal gaps and strengthening a destination's international business profile. Uzbekistan, having liberalized its tourism policy since 2017 and set an ambitious target of twenty million annual international arrivals by 2030, has identified MICE tourism as a strategic diversification priority alongside ecological, gastronomic, medical and pilgrimage tourism. This article examines the organizational and economic foundations required for Uzbekistan to build a genuinely competitive MICE ecosystem. It reviews the conceptual underpinnings of MICE tourism, surveys international best practice, assesses the current institutional, infrastructural and market conditions in Uzbekistan, identifies the principal organizational bottlenecks, and evaluates the sector's economic multiplier potential. The article concludes with a set of strategic directions — institutional coordination, venue and human-capital investment, destination marketing, and public-private partnership mechanisms — that could accelerate Uzbekistan's transition from an emerging to an established MICE destination in the Central Asian region.

Keywords: *MICE tourism, business tourism, Uzbekistan, destination competitiveness, tourism economics, convention industry, Central Asia.*

Introduction: Tourism has become one of the fastest-growing sectors of the Uzbek economy over the past decade. Following the liberalization of visa and tourism policy that began in 2017, international arrivals rose from a modest base to more than 6.6 million visitors in 2023, and the pace of growth has accelerated further since: Uzbekistan received over 1.77 million international tourists in the first two months of 2026 alone, a year-on-year increase of roughly a third, and more than 6.5 million visitors in the first half of 2026, up almost twenty-five percent on the same period of the previous year. This rapid expansion has prompted policymakers to look beyond the country's traditional Silk Road heritage offer — centred on Samarkand, Bukhara and Khiva— toward niche segments capable of sustaining growth throughout the calendar year and raising the average value of each visit. The government's tourism roadmap through 2030 explicitly names meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions (MICE) tourism, alongside ecological, gastronomic, medical, pilgrimage and sports tourism, as a priority diversification track, together with a doubling of four- and five-star hotel capacity and an expansion of accommodation stock to roughly ninety-five thousand rooms.

MICE tourism is attractive to national and municipal authorities for reasons that go beyond simple visitor counts. Business travelers and event delegates typically spend several times more per day than leisure tourists, book further in advance, are less sensitive to seasonality, and generate reputational and investment spillovers for the host economy that extend well beyond the tourism sector itself. For a country such as Uzbekistan, which is simultaneously trying to attract foreign direct investment, position itself as a regional logistics and trade hub, and diversify its export base, a credible MICE offer can function as a form of economic diplomacy as much as a tourism product.

The Concept and Economic Significance of MICE Tourism: The acronym MICE denotes four related but distinct activity types — corporate and association meetings, incentive travel programmes offered by companies to reward staff performance, conferences and congresses organized around a professional or scientific theme, and trade exhibitions or fairs. What unites these activities is that travel is undertaken primarily for a business, professional or organizational purpose rather than for leisure, even though delegates frequently extend their stay to explore the destination, a phenomenon the industry refers to as 'bleisure' travel. Economically, MICE tourism is prized for several structural characteristics. First, it commands higher average spending per visitor than conventional leisure tourism, because costs are frequently borne by employers or event organizers rather than individual travelers, and because delegates use premium accommodation, catering and ground-transport services. Second, MICE demand is comparatively resilient to seasonality: corporate calendars, academic conference cycles and trade-fair schedules are planned well in advance and are less weather-dependent than beach or heritage tourism, allowing host cities to smooth occupancy across the year. Third, large-scale events generate a wide multiplier effect across the local economy — hospitality, catering, transport, retail, interpretation and translation services, audiovisual production and event logistics all benefit — and this effect is amplified when a destination succeeds in becoming a repeat host for recurring international events. Fourth, and perhaps most importantly for a transitional economy, MICE events function as a showcase: hosting an international congress or trade exhibition places local business, academic and administrative elites in direct contact with foreign counterparts, creating channels for trade, investment and knowledge transfer that outlast the event itself.

These characteristics explain why national and municipal tourism authorities worldwide, from Singapore and Dubai to smaller emerging destinations, have

invested heavily in dedicated convention infrastructure and in specialized promotional bodies known as convention and visitor bureaus (CVBs), whose function is precisely to bid for and coordinate the delivery of international events.

Global Trends and International Best Practice: International experience points to a consistent set of preconditions for MICE competitiveness. Leading destinations combine purpose-built venue infrastructure — congress centers, exhibition halls and adjacent hotel clusters within walking distance of one another — with dedicated promotional agencies that operate independently of, but in close coordination with, general tourism marketing bodies. These convention bureaus typically perform three functions: destination bidding for international association events, coordination of local supplier networks (professional congress organizers, audiovisual firms, destination management companies), and data collection that allows the destination to track and report the direct economic impact of the events it hosts. A second recurring feature is specialization. Rather than attempting to compete across every segment of the meetings industry, successful emerging destinations tend to identify niche verticals in which they hold a genuine comparative advantage — historical or cultural distinctiveness, proximity to a particular trade corridor, a strong academic or scientific base in a specific discipline, or favorable visa and cost conditions relative to established hubs — and build a marketing and bidding strategy around that niche. A third feature is the sustained use of familiarization trips, global distribution partnerships and digital marketing to build destination awareness among meeting planners, who tend to be a small, professionally networked and risk-averse community.

Conclusion: Uzbekistan enters the competition for international MICE business with genuine advantages: rapid and sustained growth in overall international arrivals, an ambitious and well-resourced national tourism strategy, an expanding stock of upscale hotel capacity, a distinctive cultural and historical brand along the Silk Road, and a stated policy commitment to MICE as a diversification priority through 2030. These advantages, however, do not by themselves constitute a competitive MICE ecosystem. International experience consistently shows that destination competitiveness in this segment depends on institutional specialization, dedicated venue and human-capital investment, and sustained, professionally targeted marketing to meeting planners — conditions that are only partially in place in Uzbekistan today.

The organizational and economic perspectives reviewed in this article suggest that the most productive next step is not simply further growth in leisure arrivals or additional hotel construction, but the deliberate construction of the institutional layer — a specialized convention and visitor bureau, a professional congress-organizing sector, and MICE-specific performance data — that would allow Uzbekistan to convert its existing tourism momentum into a genuinely competitive and self-sustaining business-events industry. Achieving this would not only support the government's broader target of raising tourism's contribution to GDP, but would also strengthen Uzbekistan's positioning as a hub for regional trade, investment and professional exchange across Central Asia.

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