

SURGE IN FOREIGN TOURISTS TO AFGHANISTAN: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TOURISM AND CULTURAL GROWTH

by

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Tourism and culture are interconnected and boost the social, cultural and economic growth of a country, playing a major role for building a soft power influence. It strengthens public diplomacy, paving the way for the exchange of cultures, social interactions and sharing ideas between tourists and people of the host country. As such, Afghanistan is still an attractive tourist destination for foreigners in terms of its rich history, cultural civilization, social context, and geographical location, even though it has been conflict-affected for a long time. The continued political and military conflicts had contributed to a decrease in the arrival of tourists and had a direct impact on the tourism industry, creating unemployment, and low revenue. Prior to that, [Afghanistan was host to 90,000 foreign tourists in the 1970s](#). Regrettably, the country's tourism industry was not given significant attention and foreign tourists also didn't have an interest in traveling to Afghanistan due to security reasons after 1978 when the country was stuck in political turmoil and later faced civil war. Foreign tourists would also have been limited to Kabul city.

The country is slowly seeing a return of tourists but there are still some multidimensional challenges, including the absence of basic facilities and modern infrastructures, but these can be developed by the right kind of management.

Surge in Foreign Tourists Under Taliban Rule

Contrary to expected predictions, it has been more than two years after the Taliban's takeover and the country is increasingly looking like an attractive destination to explore for both domestic and foreign tourists.

As such, there has been an influx of foreign tourists every month. Surprisingly it started from European

and Western countries like Britain, Germany, France, the United States of America, Australia, Canada, Spain, Finland, Sweden, Hungary, Poland, New Zealand, Belgium, Greece, Ireland, Netherlands, Italy, Turkey, Mexico, Columbia, Argentina, Portugal, Ukraine, and Chili. In addition, visitors from Asian countries like India, Pakistan, Iran, China, Japan, Russia, Thailand, Philippines, and other countries have also travelled to Afghanistan since the Taliban takeover. When the tourists arrive in Afghanistan, they tend to wear Afghan traditional clothes, eat Afghan food, and learn about Afghan traditional customs, which is an excellent route for cultural growth. Afghanistan witnessed many more foreign visitors in 2023 compared to 2022, particularly when there was a record number of around [2,500 foreign visitors](#) in November 2023 alone. Given the international sanctions imposed against the Taliban by the international community, the question arises why are tourists interested in visiting Afghanistan under the Taliban rule?

The first thing the Taliban did was ensure domestic security amidst the economic crisis so that it could assure the people of Afghanistan including other foreigners to invest in Afghanistan and travel to various places. Second, the international community directly started engagement with the Taliban to seek solutions to relevant matters of concern, for example, security and human rights related issues and the immediate resumption of humanitarian aid by the western and non-western countries to the people of Afghanistan to restore the Afghan economy. Some neighboring and regional countries such as Pakistan, Iran, China, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Russia, Qatar, United Arab Emirates and Turkey soon opened diplomatic missions in Kabul to engage directly with the Taliban on relevant issues. Third, Afghanistan is well known as the "graveyard of empires" from [Alexander the Great to the U.S.-led invasions](#), thereby foreign tourists are keenly interested in exploring Afghanistan, and meeting up with the people of Afghanistan in order to learn more directly, about Afghan history, culture, and socio-economic conditions.

The current surge in foreign tourists to Afghanistan

primarily is the outcome of Afghanistan's rich history, the security for foreign tourists ensured by the current Taliban regime, and the active engagement of the international community, governmental and non-governmental organizations. It is possible that the number of foreign tourists may increase especially if the current situation improves further.

Recommendations for Tourism and Cultural Growth

Afghanistan has become a place to travel and visit again for foreign tourists after the Taliban takeover. However, it needs a comprehensive policy framework to support and promote the tourism industry and cultural constituency of Afghanistan to attract more foreign tourists annually. As such, the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan should announce tourist visas free of charges and provide full security in the country for tourists to travel everywhere without any fear or threat, which is important for the mental and physical stability of a tourist. Additionally, foreign tourists need facilities of value and convenience; national and local maps, travel guides, transportation, safety and security, suitable options for lodging and upscale restaurants to be built at zonal levels.

Afghanistan is a [multi-ethnic and multi-lingual nation](#), practicing a variety of traditional cultures, social contexts, clothes, cooking different types of food, providing amazing fruits, playing music in several languages, a popular national dance known as Mili Atan, manufacturing top-quality handicrafts, and other cultural and social traditions including historical sites and places. The country should be introduced through a useful guidebook together with beautiful photos in English language, available both at the relevant tourism organs of government and outside diplomatic missions of Afghanistan so as to be easily accessible for tourists.

Despite economic challenges in Afghanistan, the government needs to revive the tourism industry and seeks funds from UNESCO to promote the cultural and historical values of the country. It is important to rebuild and repair ancient monuments, sculptures, old citadels, reputed mosques, ancient shrines and gardens, and other landmarks and archaeological remnants of ancient kingdoms, empires, and

governments. Besides the government is expected to provide facilities around the above-mentioned sites, for example, roads, parks, restaurants, and entertainment services. This also can boost income and create jobs for the local people.

For this purpose, private and public sector partnerships are required to transform tourism back into a viable economic industry. A functional, specialized web portal should be developed focusing on Afghanistan tourism and culture industry to offer an accurate picture. This will increase the attraction of tourists to travel to Afghanistan. Similarly, the culture of all tribes and ethnic groups in Afghanistan and historical sites throughout the country need to be covered by the Afghan media. Social media including special YouTube channels, Instagram, and Facebook pages should be run by the Ministry of Culture and Information. In addition to this initiative, the government should invite globally reputed YouTubers to visit Afghanistan and explore Afghanistan's culture and ancient civilization for broadcast via their YouTube channels. This will show the real picture of Afghanistan to the overseas world and positively influence the number of tourists traveling to Afghanistan.

Conclusion

After more than two years of the Taliban rule since 2021, it seems that the surge in foreign tourists is increasing because the security environment of Afghanistan is more conducive than in the years between 2001 and 2021. Also, both domestic and foreign tourists could not visit parts of Afghanistan due to security threats. As a result, it is important to note that the growth of the tourism industry will only depend on the security situation in Afghanistan and investment in this sector is based on the needs and demands of tourists. Moreover, sustainable development projects can help promote and rebuild historical and cultural sites throughout the country.

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