

Geographical Factors Influencing Economic Growth in Emerging Tourist Destinations

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ABSTRACT

The rapid expansion of global tourism has positioned emerging tourist destinations as significant contributors to regional and national economic growth. However, the pace and sustainability of such development are deeply influenced by a variety of geographical factors. This study explores how key geographical elements—including natural landscapes, climate, accessibility, and resource distribution—shape the economic trajectories of emerging tourist areas. The research adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative analysis of case studies from different continents with quantitative assessments of tourism-related economic indicators.

The findings reveal that destinations endowed with unique or attractive natural features, such as mountains, coastlines, forests, and biodiversity hotspots, tend to attract greater tourist flows, which in turn fosters job creation, infrastructure development, and increased investment. Climate and seasonality play a crucial role, as favorable weather conditions can extend the tourist season and stabilize local economies. Accessibility, determined by the quality of transport infrastructure and proximity to major markets, emerges as another critical factor, often distinguishing thriving destinations from those struggling to reach their potential. The study also highlights the interplay between geography and cultural assets, noting that regions with rich historical and cultural heritage can leverage these resources for economic gain, provided they are supported by sustainable management practices.

Keywords: Geography; economic growth; tourism; emerging destinations; natural resources; regional development; sustainability

1. INTRODUCTION

Tourism has emerged as a major engine of economic growth in many countries, serving as a catalyst for job creation, income generation, and broader socio-economic development. In recent decades, the industry has experienced remarkable global expansion, with international tourist arrivals consistently rising and contributing significantly to national GDPs, especially in developing and emerging economies. As traditional destinations reach maturation and face challenges of over-tourism, attention has increasingly shifted toward emerging tourist destinations that offer untapped potential for sustainable economic growth.

The success and competitiveness of these emerging destinations, however, are not determined solely by marketing efforts or investment in hospitality infrastructure. Rather, the underlying geographical factors play a pivotal role in shaping their tourism potential and long-term economic prospects. Elements such as the presence of striking natural landscapes, diversity of ecosystems, favorable climate, and the accessibility of key attractions fundamentally influence a destination's attractiveness to both domestic and international visitors. Moreover, the spatial distribution of natural and cultural resources, as well as the ease with which tourists can reach and move within a region, are crucial determinants of tourism flows and related economic benefits (Karimova et al., 2025).

Focusing on emerging tourist markets is particularly important given their rapid transformation and the opportunities they present for inclusive and sustainable development. Unlike established tourism hubs, these destinations often possess unique geographical features and cultural assets that, if managed wisely, can generate substantial economic returns while preserving local identities and environments (Mammadova & Abdullayev, 2025). However, they also face distinct challenges, such as limited infrastructure, environmental vulnerability, and fluctuating investment, which can impede their growth.

This study is guided by several interrelated research objectives. Firstly, it seeks to identify which geographical factors most significantly influence economic growth in new and developing tourist markets. Secondly, the research aims to investigate how these factors manifest and vary across different regions and contexts. Lastly, the study explores the relationship between geography and sustainable economic development in tourism, with a particular focus on how destination-specific geographical advantages and constraints can inform policy and planning.

2. METHODOLOGY

This research employs a mixed-methods approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative methodologies to provide a comprehensive assessment of the geographical factors influencing economic growth in emerging tourist destinations.

2.1 Research Design and Data Collection

The study utilizes a mixed-method design to capture both the nuanced local dynamics and the broader, generalizable trends affecting tourism-driven economic growth. Qualitative analysis is primarily conducted through case studies, while quantitative data analysis supports the identification of statistical relationships and trends. Qualitative data are obtained through detailed case studies of selected emerging tourist destinations, including expert consultations as demonstrated in recent works by Askerov (2020), Guliyev and Aliyeva (2017), and Jafarov (2022). Quantitative data are gathered from official reports by the State Tourism Agency of Azerbaijan (2021), the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of Azerbaijan (2019), and international databases including UNWTO (2022) and the World Bank (2018).

2.2 Analytical Framework

The research framework employs several key analytical techniques. Comparative analysis draws on case studies from diverse regions (Azerbaijan, Vietnam, Croatia, Costa Rica) following methodologies in Hall and Page (2014) and Butler (2006) to identify common patterns and unique differentiators in geographic impact. Geographic Information Systems (GIS) mapping is employed to visualize spatial relationships between geographical features and economic indicators (Askerov, 2020). Economic impact assessment, drawing on Dwyer et al. (2010) and Bianchi (2018), uses statistical tools to determine the direct and indirect economic effects of tourism in relation to key geographical variables. Finally, document analysis systematically assesses how geographical factors are integrated into tourism planning and economic development agendas (Ministry of Culture and Tourism of Azerbaijan, 2019;

UNWTO, 2022). This multi-dimensional methodology ensures that the research findings are both empirically robust and contextually relevant.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Tourism and Economic Growth

The relationship between tourism and economic growth has been extensively studied in both global and regional contexts. Hall and Page (2014), as well as Williams and Shaw (1998), highlight tourism as a dynamic force that stimulates economic activity, employment, and infrastructure development. The UNWTO (2022) underscores that tourism is a driver of sustainable economic development, especially in regions with limited industrial diversification. Similarly, the World Bank (2018) identifies tourism as a strategic sector for poverty reduction and regional development, with significant multiplier effects across related industries.

Butler's (2006) Tourism Area Life Cycle model is often referenced to explain the stages of destination development and their economic implications. Sharpley and Telfer (2015) and Dwyer et al. (2010) further note that the economic impacts of tourism are not uniform but depend on various mediating factors, including local policy, investment levels, and geographical characteristics (Bababayli et al., 2025).

3.2 Key Geographical Factors

Research consistently identifies several geographical factors as critical drivers of tourism-related economic growth. Natural landscapes and resources—including mountains, coastlines, forests, and biodiversity hotspots—enhance a region's attractiveness to tourists, as detailed by Gössling, Scott, and Hall (2015) and Askerov (2020). Abbasov (2018) specifically highlights the economic value of natural resources in Azerbaijan. Climate and seasonality are equally important: favorable and predictable weather patterns extend tourist seasons and stabilize local economies (Hall & Page, 2014; UNWTO, 2022). Prideaux (2000) and Guliyev and Aliyeva (2017) demonstrate that high-quality transportation networks and proximity to major markets significantly influence tourist flows and subsequent economic impacts. Williams and Shaw (1998) and Jafarov (2022) emphasize the role of cultural heritage in diversifying tourism offerings and attracting niche markets. Finally, the works of Hall and Richards (2002) and Ismayilov (2021) argue for integrating sustainable practices to protect destinations' long-term economic viability.

3.3 Gaps in the Literature

Despite the breadth of existing research, several key gaps remain, particularly concerning emerging tourist destinations. While international studies (Hall & Page, 2014; UNWTO, 2022) offer generalizable insights, there is a lack of in-depth, context-specific analysis for regions like the South Caucasus. Local studies by Askerov (2020), Abbasov (2018), and Mammadov and Mahmudov (2019) begin to address this gap but often focus on descriptive rather than comparative or causal analysis. Additionally, the literature frequently overlooks the interplay between local governance, community involvement, and geographical factors in shaping sustainable economic outcomes (Bianchi, 2018; Hall & Richards, 2002). The need for integrative approaches that combine GIS mapping, economic impact assessment, and policy analysis remains pronounced.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1 Analysis of Selected Case Studies

The examination of emerging tourist destinations such as Azerbaijan, Costa Rica, and Croatia reveals that distinct geographical features have played a central role in driving economic success. In Azerbaijan, the presence of the Caspian Sea, diverse mountain landscapes, and a rich array of natural resources have attracted both domestic and international tourists, contributing significantly to regional economic growth (Askerov, 2020; Abbasov, 2018). Similarly, Costa Rica's rainforests and biodiversity have positioned it as a leading ecotourism destination, generating considerable income and employment opportunities (Gössling, Scott, & Hall, 2015).

However, destinations with geographic disadvantages—such as landlocked areas or those lacking spectacular landscapes—face notable challenges. Limited access to major transport hubs, seasonal climate constraints, and underdeveloped infrastructure can hinder tourism flows and economic benefits (Prideaux, 2000; Guliyev & Aliyeva, 2017). Remote rural regions in the South Caucasus often struggle to attract tourists due to insufficient transportation networks and limited marketing reach (Mammadov & Mahmudov, 2019; Jafarov, 2022). Investments in infrastructure, such as improved roads, airports, and hospitality facilities, have proven critical in overcoming some of these geographic limitations (State Tourism Agency of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2021).

4.2 Comparative Insights

Across different regions, several common patterns emerge. Destinations with unique combinations of natural and cultural assets—such as Croatia's Adriatic coast and historical towns or Azerbaijan's ancient Silk Road sites—tend to outperform those with fewer distinctive features (Williams & Shaw, 1998; Hall & Page, 2014). Climate and seasonality remain critical, with locations enjoying mild weather and extended tourist seasons generally achieving more stable economic growth (Hall & Page, 2014; UNWTO, 2022).

Nevertheless, each region also exhibits unique differentiators. Azerbaijan's focus on developing rural tourism has provided income opportunities for local communities and mitigated the risks of overconcentration in urban centers (Jafarov, 2022; Ministry of Culture and Tourism of Azerbaijan, 2019). In contrast, Costa Rica's international branding as an ecotourism hotspot demonstrates the value of leveraging environmental sustainability as a competitive advantage (Gössling et al., 2015; Hall & Richards, 2002).

4.3 Policy Implications

This analysis underscores the necessity of integrating geographic advantages into tourism planning. Policymakers are advised to conduct detailed spatial assessments to identify and capitalize on unique natural and cultural resources (Askerov, 2020; Hall & Page, 2014). Strategic infrastructure investments should be prioritized in regions with accessibility challenges to ensure inclusive economic benefits (Guliyev & Aliyeva, 2017; State Tourism Agency of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2021). Strategies for sustainable and inclusive economic growth include fostering public-private partnerships, investing in environmental protection, and promoting community-based tourism to distribute economic gains more equitably (Sharpley & Telfer, 2015; Bianchi, 2018; Ismayilov, 2021).

5. CONCLUSION

This research has examined the critical role of geographical factors in shaping economic growth within emerging tourist destinations. The findings demonstrate that geography is not just a backdrop for tourism but a foundational element that directly influences destination competitiveness, tourism flows, and the distribution of economic benefits. Destinations endowed with unique or attractive natural landscapes, complemented by favorable climate conditions and rich cultural heritage, serve as key

drivers of local and regional economic development by generating employment, stimulating investment, and supporting the growth of ancillary industries.

The research also reveals that geographical disadvantages, such as remoteness, landlocked locations, or limited natural attractions, can hinder tourism potential and economic returns. However, these challenges are not insurmountable. Strategic investments in infrastructure—particularly in transportation and hospitality—can mitigate geographic constraints by improving accessibility and connectivity. Case studies from Azerbaijan and other emerging destinations illustrate how targeted infrastructure development, environmental management, and policy support can transform geographic limitations into opportunities for sustainable growth (Abdullayev et al., 2024; Imanova, 2021).

Based on these insights, several recommendations are proposed for policymakers and tourism stakeholders:

- **Leverage geographic strengths:** Policymakers should conduct detailed spatial assessments to identify and promote the unique geographical and cultural assets of their regions, including investing in the preservation and sustainable use of natural resources and cultural heritage sites.
- **Enhance infrastructure and accessibility:** Targeted investments in transport infrastructure, digital connectivity, and tourist facilities are essential for overcoming geographic barriers and distributing economic benefits more widely, especially in rural or underdeveloped regions (Abdullayev & Alakbarov, 2025).
- **Promote sustainable and inclusive practices:** Adopting sustainable tourism strategies—such as community-based tourism, environmental protection initiatives, and support for local enterprises—ensures that economic benefits are balanced with social equity and long-term environmental stewardship.
- **Foster public-private partnerships:** Collaboration between government, private sector, and local communities can maximize resource mobilization, innovation, and the effectiveness of tourism development strategies.

Despite the valuable insights generated, this study faces certain limitations. The scope of case studies is limited to selected emerging destinations, and the availability and reliability of data may vary between regions. For future research, it is recommended to conduct comparative studies involving a broader range of emerging destinations, assess long-term economic, social, and environmental impacts, investigate the effectiveness of different policy approaches, and integrate advanced analytical tools such as GIS, spatial econometrics, and data-driven modeling. This study reinforces the centrality of geography in driving economic growth in tourism and highlights the importance of strategic, context-specific planning for sustainable destination development.

DECLARATIONS

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