



# Ethnotourism In The Bukhara Oasis: Opportunities, Achievements and Problems

**Bobojonov Shavkatjon Ulugbekovich**

Independent Researcher (DSc) of Termiz State University, Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Historical Sciences, Associate Professor of the Department "The World History" of Tashkent State Pedagogical University Named After Nizami, Tashkent, Uzbekistan

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.47134/bai.v2i3.4364>

\*Correspondence: Bobojonov Shavkatjon Ulugbekovich

Email: [bobojonovsh2020@gmail.com](mailto:bobojonovsh2020@gmail.com)

Received: 25-05-2025

Accepted: 25-06-2025

Published: 25-07-2025



**Copyright:** © 2025 by the authors. Submitted for open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

**Abstract:** The Bukhara oasis' geographic location, distinctive natural environment, rich historical and ethnographic legacy, and potential for modern tourism are all thoroughly examined in this article. This historic oasis, which is centred on the Zarafshan River, is notable for its multiethnic makeup, national cuisine, craftsmanship, and architectural traditions. Through the harmony of Bukhara's ancient residential architecture, verandas, tandir kitchens, and guest rooms with art and nature, the author examines the aesthetic preferences and worldview of the local populace. Important details regarding the historical neighbourhoods of different ethnic groups, including Turkmens, Iranians, and Jews, as well as their cultural and religious landmarks, are also included in the article. The article illustrates how Bukhara used to look based on old photos from the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Today, national customs, folk applied arts, and culinary culture are being actively promoted by ethnotourism destinations like Shirin, Sheykhon, Qorgon, and Borontepa. The author lists the issues impeding ethnotourism's growth and makes recommendations for how to address them. This article portrays Bukhara as an outdoor ethnographic museum that is crucial to the growth of global travel.

**Keywords:** Living Museum, Craft Quarters, Outer Courtyard, Inner Courtyard, Jewish Quarter, Iranian Mosque, Gypsy Quarter, Folk Ensemble.

## Introduction

Bukhara was established in the heart of the Southern Kyzylkum Desert. To the north lies the Ichkilikkum desert, to the east the Malik Desert which reaches the Zirabuloq mountain ranges, to the south the Qarnob Desert merges with the Karshi Desert, and to the west it is bordered by the southern Kyzylkum Desert. The Bukhara oasis is connected to the Karmana oasis only through a narrow corridor formed along the Zarafshan River in the east, via the village of Khazora (Asqarov, 1973). According to A. Muhammadjonov, the Bukhara oasis has a conical shape. The oasis is bordered by the Kyzylkum Desert to the north and west through ancient irrigated lands now covered by shifting sands. To the east, it is adjacent to Chulimalik as well as the Qiziltepa and Quyimozor plateaus, while to the south it adjoins the Karshi Desert. Its width reaches up to 65 kilometers (Muhammadjonov, 1972). A unique and unparalleled nature, favorable geographical location, natural environment, rich flora and fauna, and the high culture that emerged along the Zarafshan River have always attracted people. Tourists and pilgrims have visited to see the examples of material culture that developed in the lower Zarafshan region.

The Bukhara oasis, with its millennia-old material and spiritual culture, is valued as an ethnographic reserve. As an open-air ethnographic museum, Bukhara invites tourists to witness the following:

- ancient craft neighborhoods preserved within the 555-hectare old part of Bukhara city;
- traditional and typical residential houses in historic quarters;
- historic neighborhoods, places of worship, mosques, and cemeteries of various ethnic groups;
- traditional ancient bathhouses used by the local population;
- family-run craft workshops, centers, and shops passed down through generations;
- thematic performances staged by ethnographic folklore ensembles;
- eastern bazaar life, including the viewing, tasting, and trading of national dishes, traditional halva, bread, cumin and medicinal herbs, and dried fruits;
- exploring the region's gastronomy and tasting traditional national dishes;
- participation in traditional fairs and festivals.

In open-air ethnographic museums, visitors gain a general understanding of the history and ethnography of a particular country or region, and have the opportunity to see and enjoy reconstructed settlements of the past. In recent times, there has been a growing trend in open-air museums to expand the representation of traditional crafts and activities specific to the region.

## Methodology

Information about Bukhara – which has historically held an important place in the Turkestan region – and the culture, lifestyle, customs, and traditions of its people is reflected in photographs taken and materials recorded by photographers who visited the area (Bobojonov, 2020, pp. 416–421). At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and in the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, photographers from various countries visited the Bukhara oasis among the first travelers. Among the most renowned were Dmitriy Kavkazkiy (1888), Prokudin-Gorsky (1911), Paul Nadar (1890), N. Orde (1880), N. S. Vorones (1898), Ye. A. Dmitriyev-Mamonov (early 20<sup>th</sup> century), Khan-Wiener (1924–1925), and I. N. Panov (1928–1933)" (Bobojonov, 2024, pp. 72–73).

S. M. Dudin (1863–1929) traveled to Turkestan between 1900 and 1902, during which he collected rich material on the region's architectural monuments, geographical structure, nature, population, clothing, cuisine, customs and traditions, and religious beliefs (Bobojonov, 2024, p. 46). He also tried to photograph each process separately. In his memoirs, he emphasizes that "photographing the local people and their clothing was challenging, as he had to ask for permission from each of them" (Shosaidov, 2023). The thousands of photographs collected in Dudin's collection are of great importance for studying the late medieval period of Turkestan and for gaining a clearer understanding of its historical environment.

When describing ethnotourism, we naturally pay attention to the elements of both the material and intangible culture of the people. The culture created by a people has always attracted the interest of representatives of other cultures. Seeing, experiencing, studying it,

and feeling a sense of wonder are deeply moving. The Uzbek people, with their unique culture shaped over centuries, continue to attract tourism enthusiasts. First and foremost, it is appropriate to focus on the opportunities offered by Uzbek gastronomy.

## Result and Discussion

The national dishes of the Uzbek people are famous worldwide, with over 200 varieties of plov, nearly 30 types of shashlik, 70–80 kinds of soups, as well as bread, samosa, and sweets prepared in the country. Since ancient times, Bukhara has had 228 different dishes, 18 types of bread, and 169 varieties of sweets and halva (Qurbonova, 2016, pp. 133–138).

Among the ancient neighborhoods, there were also quarters known for preparing pastries and gaining fame for their high-quality products. Alongside neighborhoods of bakers, rosewater makers, and cooks, the halva makers' quarter held a special place.

In ancient times, 72 types of halva were made in Bukhara. These included "Obinavot", "Halvoyi Gardish", "Halvoyi Teri", "Halvoyi Hiloli", "Zulbiya", "Halvoyi Chiq-Chiqa", "Halvoyi Pashmak", "Halvoyi Kunjuti", "Halvoyi Farkati", and "Halvoyi Sobuni", "Tiranji Pechak", "Sepqand", and others.

In Bukhara, each type of halva had its own distinct ancient baking technique, which required a certain amount of time and was approached with special care and dedication. Halva makers strictly adhered to these preparation methods.

As a result of adding different ingredients or altering the baking techniques, each halva maker gave a name to the sweet they invented, and gradually the variety and richness of halvas increased. All types of halva included dried fruits such as quince and cinnamon. Nuts like walnuts, pistachios, almonds, and melon seeds were added to winter halvas.

The fame of Bukhara halva is widespread not only in Tashkent, Samarkand, and the Fergana Valley but is also loved and enjoyed by the peoples of neighboring countries, particularly by the residents of Dushanbe and Khujand.

The variety of sweets with an exquisite taste and appealing appearance were not only a decoration on the table but also made the person who consumed them strong and healthy, helping them feel refreshed at any time of the year. This was certainly one of the reasons why our ancestors lived long lives.

The unique quality of Bukhara's sweet-making craft is that if the necessary ingredients are taken elsewhere to prepare halva, it does not turn out as flavorful and delicious as the original. During the preparation of sweets, the dough is made and ingredients are added, but ancient techniques are not used. Therefore, each halva maker specialized in creating their own distinctive sweets and had the appropriate equipment in their workshop.

Traditional dishes such as sumalak, green samosa, and toki pilaf are specifically cooked in the spring season. Especially during spring, toki pilaf (oshi toki), prepared when vine leaves have just sprouted and apricot dumplings are added, is a favorite dish of the oasis (Qurbonova, 1994). The method of cooking the dish by wrapping minced meat and one or two dumplings in vine leaves and placing them in the pot before adding the pilaf

carrots has made it a favorite among tourists. Russian tourists, in particular, frequently visit Uzbekistan solely to enjoy the pilaf. The Japanese enjoy eating manty, oshi sofi, colorful noodle, tuxumbarak, chakkacho'lob (qurtob), and suzma prepared in Bukhara family households, and they like drinking herbal teas known for their medicinal properties. Notably, in 2019, Uzbek cuisine was recognized as the most delicious cuisine in the world and won first place in the National Geographic Traveler Awards" (Bobojonov 2024).

Craftsmanship holds a special place in the material culture of the people. Among the important crafts of Bukhara is the art of embroidery, and every traveler visiting the oasis enjoys buying a suzan with a pomegranate flower pattern. This is because the pomegranate symbol has long been famous worldwide as a sign of fertility, abundance, happiness, love, and productivity. Italians believe that turquoise-colored suzanis have a calming effect, the Japanese see suzanis with tree motifs as symbols of life and immortality, and the French often purchase belts embroidered with scorpions for protection against evil and to gain strength and energy. Additionally, Indians buy suzanis as bags, while Kazakhs highly value them as covers for mirrors and pillows (Yazuvlari, 2021).

People from Arabia use suzanis as floor coverings, while Russian and American tourists hang them on walls as tapestries. Indians and Afghans purchase them to decorate their rooms. Moreover, Turkish tourists often buy these products in large quantities from local artisans and take them back to their homeland to sell. Thus, it is clear that these gifts, representing a particular place for foreigners, are chosen not without reason for their function as symbols of tourism and pilgrimage. Moreover, the souvenirs purchased stand out by continuously reflecting information about that specific region.

Including the viewing of dwellings and familiarizing with their construction in ethnographic tourism showcases our people's rich spiritual and material culture and contributes to the development of tourism.

Dwellings are considered a unique and complex cultural-economic complex. They are connected to various aspects of people's lifestyles, including the natural environment, types of activities, economic orientation, property and class relations, family household structures, customs and traditions, as well as ethical and religious beliefs. All of these factors influence, to some degree, the decoration and interior, exterior appearance, dimensions, shape, and volume of dwellings. The residential and household buildings of the late 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries reflect the technical styles and construction materials used by Uzbek architects of that time. In Central Asia, the primary building materials have traditionally been adobe (pakhsa), clay bricks, stone, turf, and reed. For the adobe walls and supports, white, black, and mirza poplar wood were used.

Since ancient times in Uzbekistan, eight types of wall structures have been used in residential construction: adobe (pakhsa) walls, guvala walls, brick walls, sinch walls, turf walls, roof walls, kesak walls, and shoxdevor walls (Shaniyazov 1981: 33).

In Bukhara, the main components of residential households included the inner courtyard (darun), open terrace (sufa), ayvon (veranda), an upper room (boloxona) for men, guest room (mehmonxona), tandir house (tandirxona), outer courtyard (berun), stable (saisxona), well, entrance corridor (dolon), and gatehouse (darvozaxona). In some cases, the

tandir was located inside the winter kitchen. In such instances, a vented cover called *khastak* was placed above the kitchen to allow smoke to escape.

According to the construction design of the houses, the orientation of the rooms was carefully selected. For example, summer rooms were built facing north, while winter rooms faced south. Residential buildings with complex layouts were divided into two parts: *havli berun* (outer courtyard) and *havli darun* (inner courtyard) (Manakova, 1991). The outer courtyard was two-storied, with the lower floor (*tagxona*) housing the stable (*otxona*), and the upper floor (*boloxona*) serving as the guest room. The inner courtyard included a corridor leading to the summer rooms facing north, an open space (*madon*), winter rooms situated opposite the corridor, and utility rooms, a kitchen, and a long veranda along the other two sides of the courtyard. A distinctive feature of residential houses in the oasis – rarely found in other regions – was the presence of a *shahnishin*, a special area reserved for honored guests (Pisarchik 1937). “*Shahnishin*” is originally a Persian word meaning “the place where the king sits”. Guests of high status would observe ceremonies and feasts held in the main room from a separate chamber through a special lattice or open space. This architectural element was not found in every household – it was present only in wealthy homes. Currently, 122 courtyards have been included in the list of cultural heritage sites, taking into account their high artistic and historical value (Bobojonov, 2017).

Elements of ancient Iranian and Eastern Hellenistic cultures are reflected in the construction of traditional dwellings. Special attention was also given to the colors of floral patterns and decorations used in room adornment. For example, bright colors – such as red, reddish hues, and golden tones – symbolically represented the upper celestial world or the world of the sun. In contrast, darker tones – such as blue and deep green – symbolized the fertility and abundance of the earth. The people of Bukhara prioritized harmony with nature in decorating their homes, striving to reflect the beauty of the surrounding environment within their living spaces. They lived in appreciation of the artistic beauty created by human hands, treating their homes almost like personal museums. The overall philosophy reflected in their home decor was one that symbolized peace, happiness, prosperity, and a bright life in the world.

In the sedentary lifestyle of Uzbeks, Tajiks, and other peoples, the construction of staircases held a special place in traditional folk architecture. Stairs not only served a functional purpose but also added architectural beauty and a sense of grandeur. They provided access to verandas and upper rooms such as “*boloxonas*”. Stone and wooden staircases could be found in two- or three-story homes. The air circulation system within the rooms was also carefully designed, with “*bodkash*” (air intake) and “*bodburo*” (air exhaust) vents functioning effectively.

Since ancient times, Bukhara has been home to people of various ethnic backgrounds, including Uzbeks, Tajiks, Jews, Iranians, Turkmens, Afghans, Indians, Tatars, Russians, Roma, and others. Even today, the city preserves old neighborhoods and courtyards belonging to these different communities. For example, around the Labi Hovuz area and Eshoni Pir Street, the historic Jewish quarter – formerly known as Juguton Street (Jewish Street) – still remains. Historically, there were 10 Jewish mahallas (neighborhoods) in



Bukhara, with three of them – Mahallai Nav, Mahallai Kohna, and Amirobod – considered the main ones (Almeyer, 2011). Currently, two Jewish synagogues, one Hebrew school, and several traditional houses have been preserved in their original condition. In the former Emirate of Bukhara, the homes of renowned Jewish court musicians and singers, such as Levi Bobokhonov (Levicha), can still be seen. During the Soviet era, well-known artists like Tufakhon (Yafa Pinkhasova), Oliyakhon Khasanova, and Mukhabbat Shamaeva also lived in this very neighborhood.

In the Jo'ybori Darun (Inner Jo'ybor) district of Bukhara, Iranians primarily resided (Rempel, 1960). To this day, the area preserves the Shia Iranian mosque – the Husayniyya, as well as the Bog'ir and Sog'ir saints' shrines and the Iranian cemetery in Jo'ybori Berun (Outer Jo'ybor). Tourists visiting the neighborhood can closely observe the lifestyle, rituals, and traditional cuisine of the Iranian community. Similarly, Turkmen, Tatar, and Jugi (Roma) neighborhoods have also been preserved in Bukhara.

The careful consideration of every detail in the construction of residences demonstrates the unparalleled intellect, meticulousness, and professional craftsmanship of our ancestral architects. It also reveals their mastery of exact sciences such as mathematics, geometry, chronology, and metrology. Such sophisticated architectural structures and traditional homes have, to this day, become a point of interest and a popular destination for foreign tourists.

One of the important branches of Bukhara ethnography is folklore ensembles. The people, long passionate about art, have created songs, dances, muxammas (a form of poetry), bahru bayt (metrical verses), and verbal duels in two languages: Uzbek and Tajik. These artistic works, products of the people's oral creativity, have been passed down from generation to generation and have survived to this day. Currently, the "Shiru Shakar" Bukhara ethnographic folklore ensemble has been established, reviving the fading and forgotten national traditional Bukhara songs and dances. At the Olimjon Caravanserai (19<sup>th</sup> century), the ensemble attracts both local and foreign tourists with their repertoire.

Tourists and pilgrims from around the world visit Bukhara for various purposes. Europeans and Americans come to Bukhara, an exotic city located on the Great Silk Road, a center of craftsmanship, and a land of Islamic architecture. The French visit motivated by the desire to see the Timurid Empire and the buildings constructed during that era (Dala Records, 2021). Visitors from Muslim countries, especially Turks, frequently return motivated by the desire to see the homeland of their ancestors – the lands of the Seljuks and Karakhanids. Indonesians come to visit Imam Bukhari, while Persian-speaking peoples are drawn by the cities where Hamadani, Rudaki, and Saadi Shirazi once walked and created their works.

Today, by utilizing Bukhara's existing ethnographic tourism opportunities, an ethnotourism village, tourist neighborhood, tourism cluster, tourism complex, tourist street, and gastronomic streets have been established in the region. The following can be included among these.

**Table 1.** Table of Ethnotourism Sites in the Bukhara Oasis

No	Tourist site	Location address	Types of services
1.	Shirin Ethnotourism Village	Bukhara Region, Vobkent District, Shirin Village	Familiarization with village life, living in yurts, observing the preparation processes of shurdanak and halva, enjoying tunkat tea;
2.	Sheyxon Tourism Center	Bukhara Region, Bukhara District, Sheyxon Village	Watching performances by folklore ethnographic ensembles, tasting the regional specialty, sofi osh (Sufi pilaf);
3.	Borontepa Tourism Cluster	Bukhara Region, Romitan District, Choli Urganji Massif	Experiencing the emir of Bukhara's tent dwelling, enjoying royal Bukhara national cuisine, feeling the desert atmosphere, exploring the flora and fauna, and riding camels;
4.	Joyi Mo'liyon Tourism Site	Bukhara Region, Bukhara District	Experiencing the Samanid era along the ancient canal, getting acquainted with village life, and enjoying fish dishes;
5.	Naqshband Workshop	Bukhara Region, Bukhara District	Participating in and observing the process of making ancient Bukhara paper, and getting acquainted with traditional crafts;
6.	Usto Davron Workshop	Bukhara Region, Bukhara City	Planting special tree seedlings for ancient Bukhara paper and observing the entire process until the paper is produced; visiting the ancient paper museum and viewing Bukhara miniature art;
7.	Qorgon Tourism Village	Bukhara Region, G'ijduvon District, Qorgon Village	Tasting the traditional ancient Qorgon cream, enjoying shordanak (a local dairy product), and strolling through the ancient village streets;
8.	Bukhara Embroidery Craft Workshop and Museum	Bukhara Region, Shofirkon District	Participating in the process of making embroidery products and exploring the museum exhibition.

In Bukhara, one of Uzbekistan's important tourist centers, reforms are being carried out to establish the industry, make efficient use of existing opportunities, and elevate the quality of service to a higher level. Nonetheless, today there are several problems hindering the development of ethnotourism in the region:

- Conducting intensive promotional activities to sharply increase the number of foreign visitors
- Establishing traditional and region-specific hotels in ethnotourism villages
- Major repairs of internal roads leading to the villages
- Preserving disappearing crafts through the development of ethnotourism.

It should be acknowledged that the promotion of Bukhara's tourism is being carried out by foreigners. The world-renowned publisher "Dinara & Co" has distributed gift books abroad titled "10 Reasons to Visit Uzbekistan" and "365 Days of Sunshine", which have been received with great interest. Entering Eastern architecture, following the route of Marco Polo, resting in the Uzbek "Alp" mountains, experiencing the life of nomads firsthand, gastronomic discoveries, studying the art of dance, researching winemaking, exploring historical cities, learning new things about art, making new friends – these ten reasons have been presented as motivating factors attracting world travelers to Uzbekistan (10 reasons to visit Uzbekistan, 2021). However, promotions are insufficient and should also be actively carried out by local representatives.

## Conclusion

The problems mentioned above have accumulated in the region over many years and today pose serious obstacles to the development of the sector. They also hinder the sustainable growth of the tourism industry and its adaptation to modern demands. To address these serious issues and to transform Bukhara into a global pilgrimage tourism center and a crossroads for travelers, a number of plans and objectives have been set for the future.

To develop ethnographic tourism in Bukhara, I propose the following suggestions:

- the Bukhara Regional Tourism Department should popularize ethnographic tourism focused on nostalgia and wellness tours;
- develop various ethnotourism routes and create a national brand for them;
- establish medical services at major sites to prevent various emergencies.

## References

- 10 reasons to visit Uzbekistan. (2021). Tashkent: Dinara & Co.
- Abdullaeva, K. (2017, March 18). *Folk customs. Darveshona – charity and almsgiving ceremony*. Kashkadarya Newspaper. <http://qashqadaryogz.uz> (Accessed March 24, 2024)
- Almeyer, R. (2011). *History of registration and activities of the second community and synagogue of Bukharan Jews in Bukhara (1989–1999)* (p. 3). Bukhara.
- Askarov, A. (1973). *Pages from the early history of Bukhara* (p. 3). Tashkent: Fan.
- Bobojonov, Sh. (2017). *Monuments of Sharif city (A journey to historical monuments of Bukhara)* (pp. 225–227). Bukhara.
- Bobojonov, Sh. (2024). Ethnographic photography of Turkestan. *Information Library Magazine "INFOLIB"*, 46(4).
- Bobojonov, Sh. U. (2020). The English spy who visited Bukhara. *Oriental Art and Culture*, (III), 416–421.
- Bobojonov, Sh. U. (2024). Darveshona in Uzbek ritual culture. *Lessons of Imam Bukhari*, (4), 24.
- Bobojonov, Sh. U. (2024). *Formation and development features of pilgrimage tourism in the Bukhara region* (pp. 72–73). Tashkent: Papes Print.
- Department of Cultural Heritage of Bukhara Region. (2020). *Current archive data*.



- Field notes. (2021, August & November; 2022, August). Bukhara region, Bukhara city.
- Field notes. (2021, August). Bukhara region, Bukhara city, Kokaldosh mahalla.
- Field notes. (2023, November). Bukhara region, Qorakol district, Kamolot mahalla.
- Korabayev, U. (2002). *Uzbek national holidays* (p. 55). Tashkent: Sharq.
- Manakova, V. N. (1991). The art of Bukhara's master builders (on the example of early 20th-century housing). *Architecture and Construction of Uzbekistan*, (5), 22.
- Muhammadjonov, A. (1972). *History of irrigation in the Lower Zarafshan valley (from ancient times to early 20th century)* (p. 25). Tashkent: Fan.
- Pisarchik, A. (1937). Urban residential houses of Bukhara and Khiva. *Architecture of the USSR*, (1).
- Qurbonova, M. B. (1994). *Traditional dishes of Uzbeks and Tajiks of the Bukhara oasis (late 19th – early 20th centuries)* (Candidate of historical sciences dissertation, p. 21). Tashkent.
- Qurbonova, M. B. (2016). The role of sweets and drinks in the material culture of the oasis. In *Ancient heritage of Bukhara* (pp. 133–138). Bukhara.
- Rempel, L. I. (1960). Architecture of old Juibari. In *Architectural Heritage of Uzbekistan* (pp. 162–164). Tashkent: Academy of Sciences of Uzbek SSR.
- Shaniyazov, K. Sh., & Ismailov, Kh. I. (1981). *Ethnographic essays on the material culture of Uzbeks in the late 19th – early 20th centuries* (p. 33). Tashkent: Fan.
- Shosaidov, A. (2023, February 25). The importance of illustrative materials in archival sources for researching regional ethnography. *Oriental Journal of History, Politics and Law*, 50. <https://www.supportscience.uz/index.php/ojhpl>
- Ulugbekovich, B. S., & Sobirovich, T. B. (2025). Bukhara Silk Bazaar as a symbol of 16th century trade and architectural heritage. *Mediterranean Journal of Basic and Applied Sciences (MJBAS)*, 9(1), 154–158.