



DEVELOPING FAMILY-BASED ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN TOURISM THROUGH ECO-TOURISM ROUTES: EVIDENCE FROM THE SAMARKAND REGION OF UZBEKISTAN

O. M. Pardaeva

Samarkand Institute of Economics and Service, Samarkand, Uzbekistan

Article history:		Abstract:
Received: 20 th February 2026		Background: The rapid growth of international tourist arrivals to Uzbekistan has created pressing demand for diversified and community-based tourism services, particularly in rural areas with high ecological and cultural value. Objective: This study examines how family-based entrepreneurial ventures can be established and scaled in eco-tourism destinations within the Samarkand region, with particular focus on the Urgut district villages of Omonqo'ton, Qoratepa, Yuqori Tersak, O'rta Tersak, and Tersak. Methods: A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining field assessment of existing tourism infrastructure, analysis of tourist route feasibility, and structured cost modelling for a four-day eco-tourism itinerary. Results: A 136-kilometre eco-tourism route encompassing five natural and cultural destinations was designed and costed at 789,570 Uzbek soums per person for a four-day trip. The largest cost components were destination entry fees (40.52%) and food services (30.39%). Discussion: The findings demonstrate that family enterprises in rural tourism can offer viable and competitive products when supported by organised route planning, safety information, and integrated service provision. Strengthening local data collection systems and expanding accommodation infrastructure remain critical priorities. Conclusion: Targeted policy support and structured capacity building for family-based tourism operators in the Samarkand region can meaningfully contribute to regional economic development and the sustainable growth of Uzbekistan's tourism sector.
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1. INTRODUCTION

Uzbekistan has emerged as one of Central Asia's most dynamic tourism destinations, attracting growing numbers of international visitors drawn to the country's remarkable historical cities, ancient Silk Road heritage, diverse landscapes, and rich cultural traditions. This rising interest in Uzbekistan as a tourist destination has created both opportunities and challenges: while visitor numbers continue to climb, the infrastructure, service quality, and community involvement required to sustain long-term tourism growth remain unevenly developed across the country's regions.

Among the many areas that hold significant but still under-realised tourism potential, the Samarkand region stands out as particularly compelling. Home to UNESCO-listed monuments and surrounded by ecologically diverse mountains and valleys, Samarkand and its surrounding districts attract both heritage-focused and nature-seeking travellers. However, the benefits of this tourism activity have not yet been distributed equitably, and rural communities within the

region — especially those in mountainous areas such as the Urgut district — lack the entrepreneurial structures, service facilities, and organisational capacity needed to fully participate in and benefit from the tourism economy.

Family-based entrepreneurship has long been recognised internationally as a vital mechanism for decentralising economic benefit and promoting community-level participation in tourism. When properly supported, family enterprises can offer authentic, personalised experiences that large commercial operators often cannot replicate. They also tend to retain a higher share of tourist expenditure within local communities, contributing to poverty reduction and the preservation of traditional livelihoods. In Uzbekistan's rural tourism context, family businesses operating guesthouses, food service points, guided excursion services, and craft workshops represent one of the most promising avenues for inclusive tourism development.



Despite this recognised potential, family-based tourism entrepreneurship in the Samarkand region remains fragmented, underserved, and insufficiently studied. Existing literature on tourism development in Uzbekistan has focused primarily on major urban attractions, with comparatively little attention paid to the integration of rural family enterprises into structured, commercially viable tourism products. This gap in both research and policy is particularly acute with regard to eco-tourism routes — planned itineraries through natural landscapes that combine environmental appreciation with cultural engagement and local economic participation.

This paper presents the findings of a study conducted in the Urgut district of the Samarkand region, examining how family-based tourism businesses can be organised and supported along a newly developed eco-tourism corridor spanning five villages: Omonqo'ton, Qoratepa, Yuqori Tersak, O'rta Tersak, and Tersak. The research is situated within the broader policy context of Uzbekistan's national tourism development agenda, in particular the Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers No. 828 (30 September 2019), which specifically mandated the development of tourism infrastructure and family entrepreneurship in rural settlements of the Samarkand region. Drawing on field research, route design, and cost analysis, this study aims to provide an evidence-based framework for expanding family-based eco-tourism services in the region.

2. METHODS

2.1 Study Area

The study was conducted in the Urgut district of the Samarkand region, Uzbekistan — a mountainous sub-region characterised by rich biodiversity, juniper forests, natural water reservoirs, and traditional rural settlements. The five primary study sites — Omonqo'ton, Qoratepa, Yuqori Tersak, O'rta Tersak, and Tersak — were selected on the basis of their existing or potential eco-tourism significance, their geographic proximity to one another, and their inclusion in the Cabinet of Ministers' 2019 regional tourism development resolution.

2.2 Data Collection

A mixed-methods approach was adopted. Qualitative data were gathered through systematic field observation of each site's natural environment, existing service infrastructure, and accessibility conditions. These observations were complemented by structured

interviews with local residents, family business operators, and tourism sector stakeholders in the Urgut district. Relevant national policy documents and tourism planning guidelines were reviewed to contextualise the study within Uzbekistan's broader regulatory framework.

2.3 Route Design and Feasibility Analysis

Based on field assessments and stakeholder consultations, a four-day eco-tourism itinerary was designed for the five study sites. The itinerary was structured to accommodate groups of up to twelve tourists, combining transport-based travel on a 136-kilometre corridor with approximately 20 kilometres of walking sections suited to the mountainous terrain. Route feasibility was evaluated against the typological framework for tourism routes outlined in the national guidebook on route planning (Khayitboev et al., 2016), which classifies routes by mode of travel, seasonality, spatial configuration, and thematic focus.

2.4 Cost Modelling

Per-person travel costs were calculated based on the four-day itinerary. Cost components included food and catering, site entry fees, transport, professional guide services, and travel agency management fees. All figures are presented in Uzbek soums and reflect estimated market rates at the time of the study. The cost breakdown was used to assess the economic viability of the route and to identify opportunities for improving cost efficiency and expanding family enterprise participation.

2.5 Ethical Considerations

All field research activities were conducted with the informed consent of participating individuals and communities. No personally identifiable information was collected from interview participants. The study adhered to the ethical standards applicable to social science research in Uzbekistan.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Tourism Services Framework for Family Entrepreneurship

Field observations confirmed that family-based tourism enterprises along the Urgut district corridor can realistically provide — or be developed to provide — a structured range of tourism services aligned with the national typological framework. These service categories, together with the key operating conditions applicable to each, are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Types and Operating Conditions of Tourism Services in the Samarkand-Urgut Eco-Tourism Corridor

No.	Service Type	Operating Conditions and Requirements
1	Transport Services	Use of private vehicles, chartered buses, or locally rented transport; compliance with road safety regulations; adherence to



No.	Service Type	Operating Conditions and Requirements
2	Accommodation Services	speed limits; provision of safety information for passengers; consideration of ecological impact of vehicle use. Family guesthouses, tourist camps, and homestays; clear classification of facility grade and service level; provision of location details, amenity descriptions, and environmental management standards.
3	Catering Services	Restaurants, cafes, teahouses, and mobile catering units; service type options including full board, half board, and à la carte; inclusion of traditional and locally sourced dishes; provision of meal timing schedules aligned with route itinerary.
4	Excursion Services	Guided tours on foot and by vehicle; thematically structured content covering natural, historical, and cultural highlights; planned rest and refreshment stops; integration of ecological awareness content.
5	Route Documentation	Comprehensive route dossiers including itinerary maps, participant briefings, safety advisories (including warnings about venomous wildlife), service provider contact information, and post-trip reporting materials.

3.2 Eco-Tourism Route Design

A four-day eco-tourism route titled 'Samarkand–Urgut' was developed, covering a total distance of 136 kilometres. The route connects five ecologically and culturally significant sites in the Urgut district, progressing through Mingarchcha (Ming Archa), Qoratepa, Tersak, Yuqori Tersak and O'rta Tersak, and culminating at Omonqo'ton — the largest family-run

tourism complex in the district. Given the mountainous character of much of the terrain, approximately 20 kilometres of the route are designated for travel on foot, with the remainder covered by road vehicle. The route operates seasonally over seven months of the year, reflecting local climatic constraints. Full route specifications are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Specification of the Samarkand–Urgut Eco-Tourism Route

No.	Parameter	Detail
1	Operational Season	7 months per year
2	Route Category	Eco-tourism
3	Total Route Distance	136 km
4	Mode of Travel	Road vehicle (116 km) and on foot (20 km)
5	Group Size	Up to 12 tourists
6	Destination Sites	Ming Archa; Qoratepa; Yuqori Tersak and O'rta Tersak; Tersak; Omonqo'ton
7	Duration	4 days

3.3 Itinerary Overview

The four-day itinerary was structured to offer a progressive and varied tourism experience, with each

day centred on a distinct destination and set of activities:

Day 1 — Ming Archa Eco-Tourism Site: Visitors are introduced to the area's extensive juniper forests



(archa), explore a specially developed zoological display, and sample traditional dishes prepared with juniper-derived ingredients — an authentic culinary experience unique to the area.

Day 2 — Qoratepa Family Guesthouse Complex: Tourists engage in recreational fishing in natural water reservoirs, enjoy scenic views across the surrounding hills and valleys, and prepare and consume freshly caught fish in an informal, community-hosted setting.

Day 3 — Tersak Tourism Complex: The day focuses on familiarising visitors with the range of services offered by local family enterprises, alongside structured exposure to the customs, cultural practices, and daily life of the rural community.

Day 4 — Omonqo'ton Family Tourism Complex: The final destination — and the largest tourism complex in

the district — offers a full spectrum of family-oriented experiences, including nature walks, sports facilities, water-based recreation, mountain and hill scenery, and communal dining options.

3.4 Per-Person Cost Analysis

The per-person cost for the four-day eco-tourism package was calculated at 789,570 Uzbek soums. As shown in Table 3, this total is composed of five principal cost categories. Destination entry and participation fees represent the largest single expenditure item at 40.52% of total cost, followed by food and catering at 30.39%. Transport (6.07%), professional guide fees (6.33%), and travel agency management fees (16.66%) account for the remainder.

Table 3. Per-Person Cost Breakdown for the Samarkand–Urgut Four-Day Eco-Tourism Package

No.	Cost Category	Amount (UZS)	Share (%)
1	Food and Catering	240,000	30.39%
2	Destination Entry and Participation Fees	320,000	40.52%
3	Transport	47,975	6.07%
4	Professional Guide Fees	50,000	6.33%
5	Travel Agency Management Fee	131,595	16.66%
Total		789,570	100%

4. DISCUSSION

4.1 The Strategic Role of Family Enterprises in Rural Eco-Tourism

The findings of this study highlight the considerable untapped potential of family-based tourism enterprises in the Urgut district, and by extension across rural Uzbekistan. The five sites examined — Omonqo'ton, Qoratepa, Yuqori Tersak, O'rta Tersak, and Tersak — each possess distinct natural and cultural assets that, when combined into a structured itinerary, yield a commercially viable and experientially diverse eco-tourism product. The four-day route designed in this study demonstrates that with appropriate planning and service standardisation, family enterprises can serve as the primary delivery mechanism for quality rural tourism experiences.

This finding is consistent with international evidence from destinations such as Nepal, Turkey, and rural Spain, where family-run guesthouses, guide services, and food businesses have been shown to outperform larger commercial operators in terms of visitor satisfaction, community economic benefit, and cultural authenticity. The Urgut district's combination of

mountain scenery, traditional village life, and distinctive ecological features — particularly its juniper forests — positions it well for precisely this type of experience-focused, community-embedded tourism development.

4.2 Route Safety and Information Provision

A recurring theme in the tourism planning literature, and one explicitly raised by sector specialists consulted in this study, is the critical importance of visitor safety on eco-tourism routes traversing ecologically diverse terrain. The Urgut district's mountainous environment is home to venomous reptiles and insects, including snakes, scorpions, and karakurt spiders, whose presence constitutes a genuine safety risk if inadequately communicated to visitors. Route documentation must, as a minimum standard, include explicit warnings about potentially dangerous fauna, specify areas of highest risk, and advise on recommended precautions.

This 'right-to-be-informed' principle — well established in national tourism route design guidance — needs to be operationalised consistently across all family tourism enterprises in the study area. At present, safety information provision is uneven, representing both a



risk management gap and a potential source of competitive differentiation for operators who invest in comprehensive visitor orientation.

4.3 Data Gaps and Monitoring Challenges

One of the more significant structural challenges identified during this study concerns the limited availability of reliable, timely data on tourism activity, community economic outcomes, and visitor flows in the Urgut district and the Samarkand region more broadly. While national-level tourism statistics are periodically compiled, real-time or community-specific data — on metrics such as local employment generated by tourism, household income from tourism-related activities, or visitor satisfaction with individual service providers — remain largely absent.

This data vacuum constrains the ability of policymakers, investors, and family entrepreneurs themselves to make evidence-based decisions. Without robust information on how tourism revenues flow through local communities, it is difficult to assess whether the inclusive economic development objectives enshrined in national policy are being realised in practice, or to identify which interventions would most effectively expand community benefit. Establishing a regional tourism monitoring system, potentially leveraging mobile data collection and partnerships with local government, would represent a high-priority investment.

4.4 Infrastructure and Capacity Constraints

The physical infrastructure available to support eco-tourism in the Urgut district, while showing meaningful development in recent years, remains insufficient to accommodate projected growth in visitor demand. Accommodation capacity is particularly limited — the absence of adequate family guesthouse networks along the proposed route means that visitor groups must currently be relatively small and that overnight stays are constrained. Expanding the network of qualified family accommodation providers, supported by standardised classification criteria and access to affordable financing, would substantially enhance the route's carrying capacity and commercial sustainability.

Guide service quality and transport coordination represent additional areas requiring systematic investment. While some family enterprises have developed informal guiding capacity, professional certification programmes and language training — particularly in English and other international tourist languages — would strengthen the visitor experience and expand the potential market.

4.5 Policy Implications

The findings of this study carry clear implications for tourism policy in Uzbekistan. The Cabinet of Ministers' Resolution No. 828 (2019) established a sound policy foundation by specifically mandating the development of family-based tourism infrastructure in rural Samarkand. This study's findings suggest that implementation of this mandate would benefit from a more structured, multi-actor approach: one that coordinates route standardisation, safety protocols, service quality benchmarking, data collection, and financial support for family enterprises within a unified regional development framework.

Incentive mechanisms — including tax relief, micro-credit facilities, and business development grants targeted at family tourism operators — could meaningfully accelerate the establishment of new enterprises along identified eco-tourism corridors. Equally important is the development of a regional tourism brand for the Urgut district, capable of positioning the area as a distinctive eco-tourism destination within Central Asia.

5. CONCLUSION

This study has examined the conditions and prospects for expanding family-based entrepreneurship in eco-tourism across five rural communities in the Urgut district of Uzbekistan's Samarkand region. Drawing on field research, route design methodology, and cost analysis, the study has demonstrated that a structured and commercially viable eco-tourism product can be built around the natural and cultural assets of Omonqo'ton, Qoratepa, Yuqori Tersak, O'rta Tersak, and Tersak, with family enterprises positioned as the primary service providers.

The four-day 'Samarkand–Urgut' eco-tourism route — covering 136 kilometres and priced at approximately 789,570 soums per person — represents a tangible and replicable model for rural tourism development in the region. The study's findings underscore the need for strengthened safety information protocols, expanded accommodation infrastructure, improved data collection systems, and targeted policy support to unlock the full potential of family-based eco-tourism entrepreneurship. Future research should examine visitor satisfaction outcomes along the proposed route, conduct comparative analysis of family enterprise performance across different Uzbek regions, and assess the longer-term community economic impacts of structured eco-tourism development. Such work would further strengthen the evidence base required to guide sustainable, inclusive tourism growth in Uzbekistan's rural heartlands.



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