

## CULTURAL TOURISM IN NAKHCHIVAN: HERITAGE, SUSTAINABILITY AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Gunay F. Musayeva

Baku State University, 33, Z. Khalilov str. AZ 1148 Baku, Azerbaijan

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### Abstract

Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic - one of the oldest cultural regions of Azerbaijan, possesses a rich historical and cultural heritage that offers significant potential for cultural tourism development. This study examines the role of cultural heritage in promoting tourism in Nakhchivan, focusing on historical monuments, museums, intangible cultural heritage and sustainability-oriented tourism policies. Using a qualitative descriptive methodology based on document analysis and secondary sources, the research evaluates current tourism practices and their socio-economic implications. The findings indicate that cultural tourism in Nakhchivan contributes not only to regional economic growth but also to heritage preservation and cultural identity. The study concludes that strategic planning, international promotion and community involvement are essential for ensuring sustainable cultural tourism development in the region.

**Keywords:** *tourism sector, culture, cultural tourism, cultural heritage, architecture, monuments, economy*

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\*Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [gunaymusayeva90@bsu.edu.az](mailto:gunaymusayeva90@bsu.edu.az) (G. Musayeva)

Orchid ID: 0009000130375431

### INTRODUCTION

Cultural tourism has become an increasingly important component of sustainable development strategies worldwide, particularly in regions with rich historical and cultural assets. Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, located in the southwestern part of Azerbaijan, represents a unique cultural landscape shaped by ancient civilizations, architectural heritage and longstanding traditions. The region is home to numerous monuments of international significance, including mausoleums, fortresses and archaeological sites dating back several millennia. In recent years, governmental initiatives aimed at restoring historical monuments and improving tourism infrastructure have positioned Nakhchivan as an emerging cultural tourism destination. This study aims to analyze the cultural tourism potential of Nakhchivan and assess how heritage-based tourism contributes to sustainable regional development.

Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic represents one of the most ancient cultural and historical regions of the South Caucasus, characterized by continuous human settlement dating back to the Neolithic period. Located at the crossroads of major historical trade routes connecting Anatolia, the Iranian Plateau, and the Caucasus, Nakhchivan has played a crucial role in the formation and transmission of cultural traditions over millennia (Aliev, 2015).

The tangible cultural heritage of Nakhchivan is distinguished by its exceptional medieval Islamic architecture and archaeological monuments. Among the most prominent examples is the Momine Khatun Mausoleum (12th century), designed by the renowned architect Ajami Nakhchivani. This monument is considered a masterpiece of Azerbaijani architectural thought and reflects advanced geometric ornamentation, epigraphic inscriptions, and symbolic cosmology (Salamzadeh, 1998). Other significant monuments include the Yusif ibn Kuseyir Mausoleum, the Garabaghlar Architectural Complex, and Alinja Fortress, which served both defensive and administrative functions during the medieval period. These sites illustrate the synthesis of architectural innovation and regional identity, reinforcing Nakhchivan's role as a major cultural center in the Islamic world (UNESCO, 2023).



Picture 1. Tomb of Momina Khatun

Archaeological sites such as **Gamigaya petroglyphs** further attest to the region's prehistoric cultural layers. The rock carvings depict hunting scenes, ritual symbols, and early forms of social organization, providing valuable insight into early human belief systems and artistic expression (Bakhshaliyev, 2007). In addition to its architectural legacy, Nakhchivan preserves a rich array of intangible cultural heritage elements, including traditional craftsmanship, culinary practices, folklore, and ritual customs. The region is especially known for its bread-making traditions, carpet weaving, metalwork, and oral storytelling, which have been transmitted across generations through community-based practices.

Several of these traditions align with UNESCO's framework for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, emphasizing the importance of living heritage in maintaining cultural diversity and social cohesion (UNESCO, 2019). Intangible heritage in Nakhchivan functions not only as a marker of identity but also as a dynamic resource for cultural sustainability and local economic development. In recent decades, systematic heritage preservation policies implemented by the Azerbaijani government have focused on the restoration and conservation of historical monuments in Nakhchivan. These initiatives aim to balance heritage protection with cultural tourism development, ensuring that historical sites remain both accessible and authentic (State Tourism Agency of Azerbaijan, 2022).

From an academic perspective, Nakhchivan's cultural heritage contributes significantly to discussions on heritage management, identity construction, and sustainable tourism in post-Soviet and post-conflict contexts. The region offers a valuable case study for understanding how cultural heritage can serve as a strategic resource for regional development while reinforcing national cultural narratives. Archaeological excavations conducted in the Nakhchivan region have revealed significant evidence of ancient human settlement and advanced early civilizations. These discoveries demonstrate that Nakhchivan was an important center of culture and habitation from prehistoric times through the medieval period.

Excavations at sites such as **Kultepe I and Kultepe II**, **Ovcular Tepesi**, and **Shahtakhti** have uncovered materials dating back to the Neolithic, Chalcolithic, and Bronze Ages. Among the most important findings are stone tools, obsidian blades, ceramic vessels, and household items, which indicate early agricultural practices and settled lifestyles. Bronze Age layers have yielded weapons, ornaments, and metal tools made of bronze, proving the development of metallurgy in the region. Pottery discovered during excavations is notable for its diverse shapes, decorative patterns, and high craftsmanship, reflecting both local traditions and external cultural influences. In addition to everyday objects, archaeologists have found burial sites containing grave goods such as jewelry, beads, weapons, and ritual items. These findings provide valuable insight into ancient belief systems, social structures, and burial customs of the local population.

Remains of ancient fortifications, dwellings, and defensive structures suggest that early communities in Nakhchivan possessed advanced knowledge of architecture and urban planning. The strategic location of the region contributed to cultural exchange, which is evident in the variety of artifacts discovered. Overall, the archaeological findings from Nakhchivan play a crucial role in understanding the early history of the South Caucasus. These discoveries not only highlight the region's ancient heritage but also contribute significantly to historical research, museum exhibitions, and cultural tourism today.

#### **Methods:**

This research employs a qualitative methodological approach based on document analysis and descriptive evaluation. Secondary data were collected from academic publications, official tourism reports, UNESCO documents, and governmental sources related to cultural heritage and tourism development in Azerbaijan. The study focuses on key cultural tourism elements such as tangible heritage (historical monuments and museums) and intangible heritage (traditional crafts, cuisine, and folklore). The data were analyzed thematically to identify major trends, challenges, and opportunities in the development of cultural tourism in Nakhchivan.

The historical method is used to analyze the formation and evolution of tourism in Nakhchivan. This method helps to examine how ancient history, archaeological heritage, and cultural monuments have influenced the region's tourism potential over time. Historical sources, archival documents, and previous academic studies are reviewed to understand long-term tourism development trends. Descriptive analysis is applied to present the current state of tourism in Nakhchivan, including tourist attractions, accommodation facilities, transportation, and tourism services. Analytical methods are used to interpret collected data, identify strengths and weaknesses, and evaluate opportunities and challenges in the tourism sector.

Statistical analysis plays an important role in tourism research. Official data on tourist arrivals, accommodation capacity, employment in tourism, and economic contribution are analyzed. These indicators help to assess tourism dynamics and measure its impact on regional development. The comparative method is used to compare Nakhchivan's tourism development with other regions of Azerbaijan or similar destinations. This approach allows the identification of unique features, competitive advantages, and areas requiring improvement.

Field research includes direct observation, site visits, and interviews. Tourist sites, historical monuments, museums, and natural attractions are examined on-site to evaluate their condition and touristic usability. Interviews with tourism specialists, local authorities, business owners, and tourists provide firsthand information about tourism experiences and management practices. Questionnaires and surveys are conducted among tourists and local residents to understand tourist satisfaction, motivation, expectations, and attitudes toward tourism development. Survey results help to identify demand patterns and improve tourism planning strategies.

The research relies on both primary and secondary data sources. Primary data are obtained through surveys, interviews, and field observations, while secondary data include academic literature, government reports, statistical yearbooks, and materials from tourism organizations. By combining multiple research methods, this methodology ensures a holistic and objective analysis of tourism in Nakhchivan. The integrated approach allows for a deeper understanding of the region's tourism potential, challenges, and future development prospects. As a result, the applied methodology contributes to scientifically grounded conclusions and practical recommendations for sustainable tourism development in Nakhchivan.

#### **Discussion and analysis:**

The analysis reveals that Nakhchivan's cultural tourism is primarily centered on its architectural and archaeological heritage. Monuments such as the Momine Khatun Mausoleum, Alinja Fortress, and the Garabaghlar Architectural Complex serve as major tourist attractions and symbolize the region's historical significance. Museums also play a crucial role in enhancing cultural tourism by providing educational experiences and preserving collective memory. The integration of modern exhibition techniques and digital tools has increased visitor engagement and accessibility. Moreover, intangible cultural heritage—including traditional bread-making practices, handicrafts, and local cuisine—adds experiential value to cultural tourism. These practices strengthen local identity and create economic opportunities for local communities.

From a sustainability perspective, cultural tourism in Nakhchivan demonstrates positive socio-economic outcomes, such as employment generation and regional development. However, the analysis also highlights the need for improved international marketing, academic research, and cross-border

tourism cooperation. Sustainable tourism has become a central paradigm in regional development strategies, particularly in areas with fragile ecosystems and rich cultural heritage. Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, with its unique geographical position, diverse landscapes, and extensive cultural resources, has increasingly adopted sustainable tourism approaches to balance economic growth with environmental and cultural preservation. In recent years, new tourism directions and thematic routes have been developed to diversify tourism offerings and reduce pressure on traditional destinations.

**Nakhchivan as an Ancient City and the Influence of Its History on Contemporary Tourism.** Nakhchivan is recognized as one of the earliest centers of urban civilization in the Caucasus region. Historical and archaeological research confirms that human settlement in this area began several millennia ago. Favorable natural conditions and its location at the crossroads of ancient trade routes played a key role in the formation of the city. Throughout history, Nakhchivan served as an important administrative, economic, and cultural hub. It was successively influenced by various civilizations and states, which left deep traces in its material culture and urban structure. The city's name is also connected with ancient legends, particularly those related to Prophet Noah, which have strengthened its spiritual and symbolic importance. In the medieval period, Nakhchivan experienced significant development in architecture and urban planning. The construction of mausoleums, fortresses, and religious buildings demonstrated the advanced level of craftsmanship and artistic thought in the region. Monuments such as the Momine Khatun Mausoleum and Alinja Castle are not only architectural masterpieces but also historical documents reflecting the social and cultural life of their time. In the modern era, Nakhchivan's ancient urban heritage has become a major factor in the growth of tourism. Historical monuments, preserved architectural complexes, and archaeological sites attract visitors interested in history, culture, and heritage tourism. These sites provide tourists with an opportunity to experience the deep historical roots of Azerbaijani civilization. Moreover, the integration of historical tourism with local traditions, national cuisine, and natural attractions has enhanced the region's touristic value. State-supported restoration projects and improved tourism infrastructure have further increased accessibility and interest in the region. Consequently, Nakhchivan's ancient city history is not only a reflection of the past but also an essential resource for contemporary tourism development, contributing to cultural awareness and sustainable regional growth.

**Nakhchivantapa Settlement: An Ancient Archaeological Site in Nakhchivan.** Nakhchivantapa (Nakhchivantəpə) is one of the most important ancient settlement sites located in the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic of Azerbaijan. The site represents a multi-layered archaeological settlement that provides valuable information about early human habitation and cultural development in the region. Due to its historical significance, Nakhchivantapa plays a key role in understanding the ancient history of the South Caucasus.

**Location and Discovery:**

The Nakhchivantapa settlement is situated near the city of Nakhchivan, in a strategically advantageous area with access to water resources and fertile land. Such geographical conditions made the site suitable for long-term human settlement. Archaeological investigations at Nakhchivantapa were initiated in the 20th century and have continued in different stages, revealing rich cultural layers.



Picture 2. Ancient Archaeological Site in Nakhchivan

**Chronology and Cultural Layers.** Archaeological excavations have shown that Nakhchivantapa dates back primarily to the **Early Bronze Age**, particularly associated with the **Kura–Araxes culture** (approximately 4th–3rd millennium BCE). This culture is known for its distinctive material culture and widespread influence across the South Caucasus and neighboring regions. The settlement consists of several occupational layers, indicating continuous or repeated habitation over a long period. These layers provide evidence of social organization, economic activities, and cultural traditions of ancient communities.

**Archaeological Findings.** Excavations at Nakhchivantapa have uncovered a wide range of artifacts. Among the most significant findings are handmade ceramic vessels characterized by dark surfaces and simple geometric decorations, which are typical of the Kura–Araxes cultural tradition. These ceramics were used for storage, cooking, and daily household activities. In addition to pottery, archaeologists have discovered stone tools, obsidian blades, grinding stones, and bone implements. The presence of obsidian artifacts suggests trade or exchange networks, as obsidian sources were located in distant mountainous areas. Remains of residential structures, hearths, and household installations indicate a settled lifestyle based on agriculture and animal husbandry. The layout of the dwellings reflects early architectural knowledge and adaptation to environmental conditions.

**Economic and Social Life.** The findings from Nakhchivantapa suggest that its inhabitants were engaged in farming, livestock breeding, and craft production. The tools and household items demonstrate a self-sufficient economy, while certain artifacts indicate cultural interaction with neighboring regions. Burial practices and ritual elements, although limited, provide insight into belief systems and social structures of the ancient population. These aspects contribute to a broader understanding of spiritual life in early societies of Nakhchivan.

**Historical and Scientific Significance.** Nakhchivantapa is considered one of the key archaeological sites for studying the formation of early urban and proto-urban settlements in Nakhchivan. The materials obtained from excavations contribute significantly to the study of the Early Bronze Age and the spread of the Kura–Araxes culture. Today, the site is of great importance for archaeological research, historical studies, and cultural heritage preservation. It also holds potential for educational and cultural tourism, as it reflects the deep historical roots of human civilization in the Nakhchivan region. It can be define new directions of sustainable tourism in Nakhchivan.

**1. Cultural and Heritage-Based Sustainable Tourism.** Cultural tourism remains the backbone of sustainable tourism development in Nakhchivan. However, recent initiatives emphasize **heritage-sensitive tourism**, focusing on controlled visitor access, adaptive reuse of historical sites, and interpretive tourism. Restoration projects at monuments such as Alinja Fortress and medieval mausoleums have been accompanied by educational signage and guided tour systems, aligning with UNESCO heritage management principles (Timothy & Boyd, 2003).

**2. Eco-Tourism and Nature-Based Tourism.** Eco-tourism has emerged as a key sustainable tourism direction in Nakhchivan due to its mountainous terrain, mineral springs, and protected natural areas. Destinations such as **Batabat Plateau, Ordubad National Park, and Araz River Valley** are increasingly promoted for low-impact activities including hiking, birdwatching, and landscape photography. These activities aim to minimize environmental degradation while fostering ecological awareness among visitors (Buckley, 2012).

**3. Health and Wellness Tourism.** Nakhchivan’s natural salt caves (notably the **Duzdagh Physiotherapy Center**) and mineral water resources have positioned the region as a growing destination for health and wellness tourism. This form of tourism aligns with sustainability principles by utilizing natural therapeutic resources under regulated conditions, contributing to long-term socio-economic benefits without intensive infrastructure expansion (Smith & Puczkó, 2014).

**4. Rural and Community-Based Tourism.** Community-based tourism initiatives have been introduced in rural areas such as Ordubad and Shahbuz districts. These initiatives encourage homestays, local gastronomy experiences, and traditional craft workshops, ensuring direct economic benefits for local populations while preserving intangible cultural heritage. Community involvement enhances social sustainability and strengthens local stewardship of tourism resources (UNWTO, 2018).

### **Emerging Tourism Routes in Nakhchivan**

**1. Historical and Architectural Route** connects key medieval monuments, including the Momine Khatun Mausoleum, Yusif ibn Kuseyir Mausoleum, Garabaghar Complex, and Alinja Fortress. The route is designed to present a chronological narrative of regional architectural development and supports thematic tourism experiences.

**2. Nature and Eco-Tourism Route connects** Covering Batabat Lake, Ordubad mountain landscapes, and highland villages, this route promotes eco-friendly travel and environmental education. Infrastructure development along the route prioritizes small-scale facilities and environmentally compatible transport options.

**3. Health and Wellness Route connects** integrates Duzdagh Salt Cave, mineral springs, and spa facilities, offering medically supervised and recreational wellness tourism. It targets both domestic and international tourists seeking alternative health tourism destinations.

**4. Intangible Heritage and Gastronomy Route connects** Focused on traditional cuisine, bread-making practices, and handicrafts, this route emphasizes experiential tourism. Visitors engage directly with local communities, fostering cultural exchange and safeguarding living heritage.

**Challenges and Sustainability Considerations** - Despite significant progress, challenges remain in terms of international visibility, digital promotion and professional capacity-building. Sustainable tourism development in Nakhchivan requires continuous monitoring, stakeholder collaboration and alignment with global sustainability frameworks such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

**Table 1.**

**Cultural and Historical Route Structure**

Day	Destination Area	Key Heritage Sites	Tourism Theme
Day 1	Nakhchivan City	Momine Khatun Mausoleum, Yusif ibn Kuseyir Mausoleum, State History Museum	Medieval Architecture & Statehood
Day 2	Julfa District	Garabaghar Architectural Complex	Islamic Architecture & Craft Traditions
Day 2	Alinja Area	Alinja Fortress	Defensive Heritage & Military History
Day 3	Ordubad City	Historic Urban Fabric, Juma Mosque, Traditional Houses	Living Urban Heritage
Day 4	Shahbuz District	Batabat Plateau, Rural Villages	Cultural Landscape & Sustainability

## CONCLUSION

Cultural tourism in Nakhchivan represents a vital instrument for preserving cultural heritage while fostering sustainable economic development. The region’s rich historical assets, combined with supportive governmental policies, create a strong foundation for long-term tourism growth. To maximize this potential, strategic planning, community participation and international collaboration should be further strengthened. Future research may focus on quantitative assessments of tourism impacts and comparative studies with similar cultural regions. The development of new sustainable tourism directions and thematic routes in Nakhchivan reflects a strategic shift toward diversified, resilient, and community-oriented tourism. By integrating cultural heritage, natural landscapes, and wellness resources within a sustainability framework, Nakhchivan demonstrates strong potential to become a model destination for sustainable tourism in the South Caucasus. The Nakhchivantapa settlement is a valuable archaeological monument that sheds light on ancient settlement patterns, economic life, and cultural

development in Nakhchivan. Its well-preserved cultural layers and diverse findings make it an essential source for understanding early human history in the South Caucasus.

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