



# CCO BRIEF ON TOURISM

**COMCEC COORDINATION OFFICE**  
**November 2025**

## 1. Introduction

Tourism, as a sector, directly affects the economic welfare, employment, income and workforce of developed and developing countries. Tourism is an important driving force both by providing a large foreign exchange inflow as well as supporting the economic development of countries. Since it is a labour-intensive sector, it also helps reduce unemployment and creates new job opportunities. Tourism not only brings countries or people together, but also increases interaction between people. This interaction enables the integration of international cultural and social communication.

The relationship between culture and tourism has been a major source of tourism growth in recent decades with cultural tourism one of the largest and fastest growing global tourism markets. Though estimates vary, depending largely on the definition of cultural tourism used, figures from the World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) suggest that 40% of tourism can be attributed to cultural tourism. In France, cultural tourism was estimated to create over 100 000 jobs and EUR 15 billion in revenue prior to the pandemic. In the UK, spending by tourists attending live music events contributed GBP 4.7 billion to the UK economy in 2019 – up 6% from GBP 4.5 billion in 2018. 4 Overseas cultural tourists are also estimated to stay longer and spend more than other tourists. For example, international visitors that took part in a cultural activity during their visit to Australia have been estimated to stay 25% longer and spend 20% more than other visitors.<sup>1</sup>

Over the decades, tourism has experienced continued growth and deepening diversification to become one of the fastest growing economic sectors in the world. Modern tourism is closely linked to development and encompasses a growing number of new destinations. These dynamics have turned tourism into a key driver for socio-economic progress.

Nowadays, the business volume of tourism equals or even surpasses that of oil exports, food products or automobiles. Tourism has become one of the major players in international commerce, and represents at the same time one of the main income sources for many developing countries. This growth goes hand in hand with an increasing diversification and competition among destinations. This global spread of tourism in industrialised and developed states has produced economic and employment benefits in many related sectors - from construction to agriculture or telecommunications. The contribution of tourism to economic well-being depends on the quality and the revenues of the tourism offer. UN Tourism assists destinations in their sustainable positioning in ever more complex national and international markets. (UN Tourism)

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<sup>1</sup> Maximising Synergies Between Tourism and Cultural and Creative Sectors, Discussion Paper for the G20 Tourism Working Group, OECD 2022

According to UN Tourism, International tourist arrivals (overnight visitors) increased by 5% in the first quarter of 2025 (compared to the same period in 2024), or 3% above pre-pandemic year 2019. Around 300 million tourists travelled internationally in first quarter of 2025, about 14 million more than in the period of 2024.

Despite growing geopolitical and trade tensions, the start of 2025 saw robust and sustained travel demand, though results were mixed among regions and subregions.

While Africa showed the strongest performance in first quarter of 2025 (+9%) as compared to the same period of 2024, the Americas (+2%), Europe (+2%) and the Middle East (+1%) saw comparatively more moderate results during this period. Asia and the Pacific (+13%) continued to rebound strongly, though arrivals still remained slightly below pre-pandemic levels.

According to UN Tourism's evaluations, total export revenues from international tourism, including both receipts and passenger transport, reached USD 2.0 trillion in 2024, or 15% above pre-pandemic levels. This represents about 6% of the world's total exports of goods and services and 23% of global trade in services. • International tourism receipts, the main component of tourism revenues, grew 11% to USD 1.7 trillion, also in real terms (adjusted for inflation and exchange rate fluctuations).

However, tourism's recovery also faces some challenges. According to the UN Tourism, economic and geopolitical headwinds continue to pose significant challenges to international tourism and confidence levels. Tourists are expected to continue to seek value for money and travel closer to home in response to elevated prices and overall economic challenges, while extreme temperatures and other weather events could affect the destination choice of many travellers. As international tourism continues to recover and expand, fuelling economic growth and employment around the world, governments will need to continue adapting and enhancing their management of tourism at the national and local levels to ensure communities and residents are at the centre of this development.

Heritage tourism, often interchangeably referred to as cultural tourism, which involves traveling to explore authentic experiences connected to the cultural, historical, and natural heritage of a specific region or community. It is an integral component of the broader tourism system, serving to deepen cultural exchange, promote economic growth, and support heritage conservation efforts. Heritage tourism encompasses various specialized themes, such as faith tourism—visiting sacred sites, pilgrimage routes, and religious monuments; gastronomy tourism—exploring local cuisines, culinary traditions, food festivals, and markets; historical tourism—engaging with historic landmarks, archaeological sites, museums, and monuments; and festival tourism—participating in traditional celebrations, cultural events, and artistic performances and so on (COMCEC 2025).

Heritage tourism assets can broadly be classified into tangible and intangible heritage resources, each playing a crucial role in attracting tourists and enriching visitor experiences while also enhancing the quality of life for locals. Tangible heritage encompasses physical assets that visitors can directly experience, including historic heritage—such as archaeological sites, historic towns, castles, monuments, museums, and sacred structures—and natural heritage, including protected areas, national parks, geological formations, and landscapes recognized for

their ecological significance. Conversely, intangible heritage comprises the non-material cultural practices, expressions, traditions, and knowledge passed through generations. Examples include local arts and crafts, folklore, traditional music and dances, storytelling, rituals, and culinary traditions. These intangible elements offer visitors a deeper connection to the local culture, enhancing authenticity and fostering cultural understanding. Together, tangible and intangible heritage assets form a complementary relationship that reinforces cultural identity, sustains local economies, promotes intercultural dialogue, and ensures holistic tourism development (COMCEC 2025).

Heritage tourism has valuable both economic and social effects, including increased revenues, boosting businesses and employment, funding new businesses, events and attractions, helping diversify the local economy, supporting small businesses; artists, local guides, educators, promoting preservation and protection of important local resources allowing local communities to share and preserve their own intangible assets. Last but not least, heritage tourism is more sustainable than mass tourism.

As tourism receipts also create much-needed funds for the preservation of the resources, economic sustainability for heritage tourism refers to the capacity of heritage tourism to provide stable economic benefits without compromising the quality of heritage resources. Heritage tourism significantly contributes to local economies by generating employment, supporting local businesses, and stimulating investment in infrastructure and services (COMCEC 2025).

OIC Member countries have rich heritage areas for visitors. Many Member Countries have been designated as UNESCO World Heritage Lists.<sup>2</sup>

In order to foster heritage tourism in OIC countries, innovation, strategic partnerships, targeted marketing, infrastructure development, and supportive policies requires a holistic approach.

## **2. COMCEC Tourism Cooperation**

COMCEC attaches utmost importance to enhance cooperation in tourism domain among the OIC Member Countries. Considering the emerging area in the tourism sector, COMCEC Tourism Working Group devoted its last two consecutive meetings to discuss the theme of “Improving the Quality and Sustainability in Heritage Tourism in OIC Countries”.

### **2.1. Improving the Quality and Sustainability in Heritage Tourism in OIC Countries**

Since the 40<sup>th</sup> Session of the COMCEC, the 24<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the COMCEC Tourism Working Group (TWG) was held virtually on April 21, 2025 and the 25<sup>th</sup> Meeting was held on September 15-16, 2025 in Ankara, Türkiye respectively, with the theme of “Improving the Quality and Sustainability in Heritage Tourism in OIC Countries”.

A research report with the same theme has been prepared for two consecutive COMCEC TWG meetings (24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup>). While the first draft of the report, along with a case country study,

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<sup>2</sup> These are UNESCO Tangible & Intangible Heritage Lists. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/>, <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/>

was submitted to the 24<sup>th</sup> TWG meeting, the final version of the report was submitted to the 25<sup>th</sup> TWG meeting. The main objective of the study was to establish a conceptual foundation for a better understanding of the current and future implications of improving the quality and sustainability in heritage tourism in the OIC Member Countries and to come up with sound heritage tourism strategies and policies to tackle the challenges that have arisen so far.

The first draft of the report revealed important findings in terms of improving the quality and sustainability in heritage tourism in general as well as in the OIC Member Countries. It provided a conceptual framework of heritage in the tourism sector in the world as well as in the OIC region and global tourism. In light of the discussions during the meeting and with the active contribution of the member countries, the draft version of the report was improved.

The final version of the report has highlighted OIC member countries with best practices, tools, a roadmap and policy recommendations that will assist them in developing, marketing and preserving heritage tourism. Specifically, the study explores strategies and a roadmap to foster heritage tourism in OIC countries. The study also identifies key barriers hindering marketing, development, and preservation of heritage tourism in OIC countries, as well as the core success factors. The study also focuses on SWOT evaluations. Additionally, the report included sound, specific, and practical policy recommendations to stakeholders and government policymakers in OIC Member Countries.

The 25<sup>th</sup> Meeting of Tourism Working Group has come up with the following policy recommendations:

- Strengthening legal protection, governance, and risk preparedness by establishing and updating tangible/intangible heritage inventories, legislation, monitoring systems, and risk and crisis management protocols.
- Securing sustainable funding for conservation, and safeguarding through funds, tax allocations, partnerships, and transparent mechanisms.
- Diversifying heritage tourism products including new heritage elements in emerging destinations, and managing visitor demand aligned with carrying capacities of the respective tourism destinations.
- Promoting, branding, and improving visitor experience through marketing communications, storytelling, infrastructure improvements, and smart technologies.
- Empowering communities through awareness, involvement, providing incentives for local employment, and developing benefit-sharing mechanisms.

The reports and presentations submitted to the Working Group are available on the COMCEC web page. (<http://www.comcec.org/> )

### **3. The COMCEC Project Funding Mechanism**

COMCEC Project Funding (CPF) is the other important instrument of the Strategy. Projects financed under the CPF need to serve cooperation among Member Countries and must be designed in accordance with the objectives and the expected outcomes defined by the Strategy in the tourism section. Projects also play important roles in realization of the policy recommendations formulated by the member countries during the TWG meetings.

In 2025, seven following projects have been selected to be supported in tourism area:

The first project, namely “Capacity Building of Stakeholders through Experience Sharing in Agrotourism Practices”, is being implemented by Burkina Faso in the partnership with Morocco. This project targets empowering the connection between agriculture and livestock farming with tourism, diversifying the range of tourist products, and enhancing the appeal of agrotourism destinations. In this respect, a training activity focusing on the technical and operational capacities of the leading stakeholders in the agrotourism sector will be held. Before this training, a study visit will be conducted to Morocco to learn best practices in agrotourism, especially in terms of practical aspects in agrotourism villages.

The second project, titled “Strategic Planning and Marketing Strategies for the Promotion of Gastronomy Tourism”, is being implemented by Bangladesh in the participation with Türkiye. This project seeks to develop comprehensive strategic plans and effective marketing strategies to position Bangladesh as a top culinary tourism destination. To achieve this, a training will be organized. During this training, participants will learn how to develop strategic plans and create marketing strategies to promote Bangladesh’s culinary heritage.

The third project, called “Empowering Sustainable Tourism: Integrating Blue, Green, Circular Economy into Tourism Operations”, has been implemented by Indonesia in partnership with Malaysia and Türkiye. This project focused on strengthening the competitive and sustainable tourism industry through promoting resource efficiency, waste management, renewable energy, and circular economy models. A detailed workshop, involving private sector representatives and government officials, was conducted in this regard.

The fourth project, titled “Enhancing Maldivian Gastronomy Tourism by Increasing the Recognition of Traditional Cuisine” will be carried out by Maldives. It aims to boost tourism competitiveness by promoting and branding Maldivian gastronomy through stronger links between tourism and local communities. Within the context of the project, a publicity meeting and the preparation of promotional materials will be conducted. The promotional materials include the creation of high-quality, comprehensive books and videos reflecting Maldivian traditional cuisine, particularly focusing on culinary practices and cultural stories. During the publicity meeting, these materials, along with the Maldives Gastronomy Strategy, will be presented to key tourism stakeholders to strengthen the branding of the gastronomy sector.

The fifth project, titled “Reimagining Islamic Heritage Tourism: Best Practices and Critical Success Factors”, is being implemented by Malaysia in the cooperation with four partners, namely Uzbekistan, Türkiye, Jordan and Mali. This project aims to identify the critical factors that contribute to sustainable Islamic heritage tourism and raise awareness among tourism stakeholders to enhance the recognition of Islamic heritage tourism. To accomplish this, a workshop and study visits will be organized. In light of the findings from these study visits, a framework and promotional document will be developed at the end of the workshop to support Islamic heritage tourism.

The sixth project, namely “Effective Management of Tourism Heritage Sites for Enhancing the Quality and Sustainability in Tourism” has been implemented by Uganda with the participation of the Gambia. This project focused on empowering the tourism economy by protecting heritage resources and values, equipping leading stakeholders in heritage tourism with effective and quality management techniques. In this respect, training aimed to cover heritage tourism, sustainability challenges and opportunities, as well as the negative and positive impacts of heritage tourism while aligning management objectives with these impacts.

The last project, titled “Promoting Gastronomy Tourism for the Destination Senegal”, has been implemented by SESRIC in partnership with Türkiye, Morocco, Tunisia, Senegal, Uzbekistan and Malaysia. This project aimed to create a strong brand identity for Senegal in gastronomy tourism by equipping relevant stakeholders with essential marketing and management skills and effective collaboration approaches. In this context, a training and a workshop were held to achieve these objectives. These activities addressed tourism marketing and promotion efforts in Senegal's gastronomy tourism, through collaboration between public and private sector stakeholders.

#### **4. Other Ongoing Activities**

Other important activities carried out under tourism cooperation can be summarized as follows:

- OIC/COMCEC Private Sector Tourism Forum provides a regular communication channel for the private sector representatives of the Member Countries. In this regard, Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the Republic of Türkiye, which serves as the Secretariat of the Forum, organized the 13<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the OIC/COMCEC Private Sector Tourism Forum on October 8, 2025, with the theme of "Tourism and Rural Development in OIC Countries".



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