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Tourism Potentials in Afghanistan: Exploring and Ranking the Historic Cities*

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Abstract

Tourism is one of the most important sectors of the world economy. Yet, despite having promising touristic attractions, such as pristine nature and ancient historical monuments, Afghanistan lacks a proper plan and infrastructure for tourism development. Although political issues have been the most significant barriers to developing tourism, the lack of correct understanding and introduction of Afghanistan's potentials has also played an important role in the backlog of the tourism sector. This study attempts to introduce the cities that have the potential to attract international tourists. First, the influential factors in attracting international tourists were discussed using library research. In the next step, the prioritization of Afghanistan's historical cities was carried out with the aim of attracting international tourists using expert assessment and the VIKOR technique. According to the findings of this study, the criteria for attracting international tourists are classified into four groups: a) socio-cultural factors, b) natural conditions, c) accommodation and equipment infrastructures, and d) communication and information infrastructures. The top seven cities in Afghanistan are Herat, Kabul, Mazar-i-Sharif, Kandahar, Bamyan, Ghazni, and Jalalabad.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Historic City, Historic Tourism, International Tourism, Urban Tourism, VIKOR Technique

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1. Introduction

Tourism has been accompanied by significant changes and growth, making it one of the fastest-growing economic sectors. The number of international tourists increased from 25 million people in 1950 to 674 million in 2000, and from 1.24 billion in 2016 to 1.326 billion in 2017, indicating a 7% growth in 2017 compared to 2016 (UNWTO, 2018). According to predictions, with an average annual growth rate of 3.3%, the number of international tourists is projected to reach 1.8 billion people by 2030. Additionally, international tourism income rose from $2 billion in 1950 to $495 billion in 2000, and from $1.245 trillion in 2016 to $1.34 trillion in 2017 (WTTC, 2019), showing a 7% increase in tourism income in 2017 compared to 2016. When including income from the transportation sector, total tourism and transportation income reached $1.58 trillion in 2017 (UNWTO, 2018).

Tourism is of significant importance, with one out of ten jobs connected to this sector. Its share in exports amounts to $1.6 trillion, accounting for 7% of total export share, and contributes 10% to national GDP per capita (UNWTO, 2018). Thirty percent of services and exports in this sector are from industry. Furthermore, tourism helps preserve culture and the environment, promotes peace and security, and stimulates employment and economic growth (UNWTO, 2017, p. 3). Historic tourism, which focuses on cultural heritage, is a significant type of tourism. The World Tourism Organization reports that 50% of international trips include visits to cultural heritage sites (UNWTO, 2017, p. 3), underscoring the importance of cultural heritage tourism globally.

Characteristics of heritage tourists include being predominantly aged between 30 to 50 years, educated with university degrees, and often holding white-collar jobs. Richards (2001) noted that 70% of cultural tourists held managerial or professional positions.

Many developed countries effectively utilize their cultural heritage for tourism and socio-economic development. However, despite abundant potential, developing countries have not fully capitalized on attracting international tourists, possibly due to insufficient identification and promotion of their potentials. Afghanistan serves as an example of such countries, with its cities offering significant potential for tourism growth and development, boasting natural attractions and ancient historical sites.

Cities like Balkh, Mazar-i-Sharif, Bamyan, Herat, Kabul, and Kandahar are among Afghanistan's important historical cities. For instance, Kabul features the National Museum, Darulaman Palace, and the tomb of King Timur. Bamyan is renowned for its Buddha sculptures and the historic city of Ghelghele. Balkh hosts the tomb of Khaje Abu Nasr Parsa and the Minarets of Zahedan, while Mazar-i-Sharif features the Blue Mosque and ancient minarets (Mofid, 1398 [2020 A. D.], p. 8).

Despite these attractions, Afghanistan's income from international tourism has been relatively low in recent years: $86 million in 2013, $151 million in 2014, $84 million in 2015, $49 million in 2016, and $2 million in 2017. These statistics underscore the weakness and lack of attention given to this sector, considering the country's cultural richness and potential. For example, with proper attention, a city like Herat could generate substantial income from international tourists.

Afghanistan has significant actual and potential capacities in terms of tourism[1]. Whenever this country enjoyed relative peace, it

1. Despite the concerted efforts outlined in this research to advance tourism in Afghanistan, it is crucial to emphasize the significant challenges the nation faces in this endeavor. Afghanistan, marked by prolonged conflict and instability, struggles with →

witnessed a considerable amount of growth and advancement. Having several thousand years of historical record, as well as cities that have been the capital of powerful governments, and the place of science, literature, and arts in the east, makes Afghanistan an abundant country for attracting tourists from inside and outside the country. The names of cities such as Herat, Kabul, Ghazni, Mazar-i-Sharif, Kandahar, and Bamyan remind of their sweet and bitter histories. These cities have been the places for training world-renowned celebrities, and have a high capacity to attract tourists due to their historical attractions.

The history and culture of a country are of significant importance to foreigners and make effective factors in attracting international tourists. Considering the importance of tourism at present and its role in the advancement and development of a country, administrative managers of Afghanistan must pay special attention to the historical cities of this country and have a comprehensive plan for the development of historical cities. Therefore, in this study, first, the indexes and the options for choosing a historical city in terms of attracting international tourists are identified and extracted and according to them, while introducing the top cities of Afghanistan, the most appropriate city is introduced. This study mainly aims to prioritize the historical cities of Afghanistan toward planning and attracting international tourists for the managers and macro-planners of the country so that they can better determine the priorities of their plans and decide which cities are more attended, thereby putting them in priority in large scale regional and country projects. The research questions are as follows:"

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substantial limitations in infrastructure development, cultural preservation, and socio-political stability. These factors are fundamental for fostering a sustainable tourism industry.

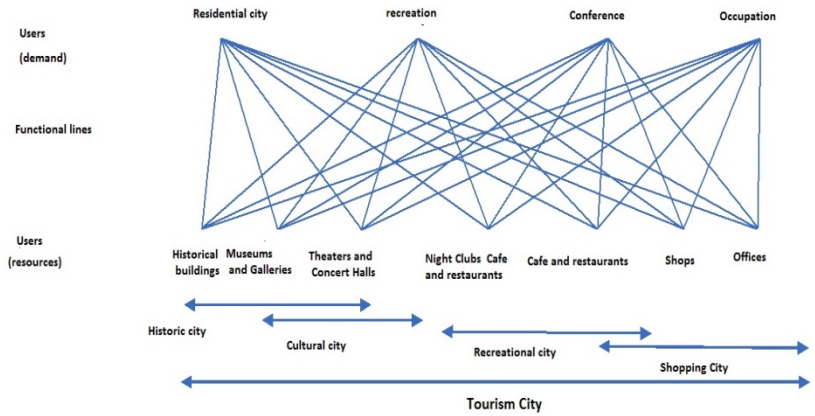
1. Which historical cities in Afghanistan have the potential for tourism development?
2. Based on tourism development criteria, which of these cities has a higher priority?

2. Theoretical Framework

The realm of tourism is a multifaceted domain, encompassing a diverse array of types and dimensions. Within this expansive landscape, our study serves as a crucial nexus, interlinking the realms of historical and international tourism. An international tourist is defined as an individual traversing two or more countries, temporarily departing from the comforts of their permanent abode for a duration extending beyond a solitary day, yet falling short of a full year, motivated by pursuits ranging from leisurely exploration to business engagements or other travel objectives (WTO, 1995). As we embark on this exploration, delving deeper into the nuances of urban and historical tourism, we are guided by a rich tapestry of scholarly literature. Tourism, in its essence, is a multifaceted phenomenon, shaped by the diverse attractions present within a city, as well as the kaleidoscope of events and motivations that propel travelers on their journeys. The ability to attract a diverse spectrum of tourists to urban centers hinges crucially upon the provision of high-quality tourism offerings, heralding a cascade of positive economic ramifications for the city and fostering its overall economic development (Saghaee, 1381 [2002 A. D.], p. 17). This intricate dance of supply and demand forms the bedrock of tourism typology, where the flow of tourism is construed as the demand, contingent upon the tourism product as the supply.

The intricate interplay of these elements is encapsulated graphically in Figure (1), serving as an illuminating depiction of tourism typology grounded in the dynamics of urban tourism demand and supply. Within the urban tourism market, a significant portion of demand is directed towards journeys to historic cities. This predilection can be attributed to the pervasive yearning for authenticity among post-modern individuals, who seek refuge from the homogenizing forces of modernity in the hallowed corridors of history. The coveted destinations within these historic cities span a rich tapestry of experiences, encompassing not only the iconic landmarks of yore, but also the poignant vestiges of battlefields, the meticulously restored architectural gems nestled amidst verdant parks, and the literary landmarks that serve as poignant reminders of the rich tapestry of human endeavors that have unfolded within these urban landscapes (Aitchison et al., 2002, p. 23).

Figure. 1 Urban Tourism and the Aims of Tourists



Source: Hall, 2014, p. 168

Historical tourism, also known as heritage tourism, is one of the six types of tourism according to nominal classification. This type focuses on visiting museums, historical sites, and historic buildings, and today, accounts for a significant portion of the tourism industry.

2. 1. Important Elements in Historic Tourism

Numerous studies have been conducted in various sections of the tourism field, including heritage tourism, historic tourism, and urban tourism, particularly concerning the prioritization of different types. For instance, Boivin and Tanguay (2019) analyzed the determining factors in urban tourism attractions in the historic and tourist cities of Quebec and Bordeaux in Canada. They classified attractions into four levels:

a. Urban supplies, consisting of:

1. Access and signs
2. Public services
3. Tourism information
4. Stores and commercial services

b. Tourism belt, including:

1. Urban space
2. Urban architecture, public space, parks, and gardens
3. Friendly places for walking

c. Complementary attractions, such as:

1. Festivals and events
2. Exhibitions
3. Showrooms and music halls

d. Basic attractions, comprising:

1. Historic buildings
2. Historic places
3. Museums
4. Art galleries

They concluded that attractions within the tourism belt play a special role in attracting tourists and should receive greater attention.

3. Literature Review

The background of the research can be revised to adopt a more analytical approach, focusing on dissecting the underlying mechanisms and implications of the studies cited:

Stratan et al. (2015) delved into the intricacies of cultural tourism potentials in the Republic of Moldova, employing a specialized study to identify capacities through cultural consumption among tourists. Their findings underscored the ramifications of incomplete cultural management, highlighting risks to the country's cultural heritage and the consequent jeopardy to tourism development. They emphasized the challenge posed by low public participation in cultural and tourism events, advocating for flexible and innovative approaches to propel the tourism industry forward.

Ismagilova et al. (2015) explored the pivotal role of historical inheritance in driving tourism development, particularly focusing on its impact on domestic tourism in Russia. By examining Eastern European experiences, they highlighted the transformative potential of leveraging historical and cultural inheritances for socioeconomic

advancement. This analytical perspective offers a deeper understanding of the intricate interplay between heritage preservation and tourism development.

Ghasemi et al. (1395 [2016 A. D.]) adopted a quantitative approach to assess urban tourism infrastructure, employing Copra's technique in a case study of Zanjan province. Their analysis revealed significant disparities in infrastructure readiness across towns within the province, with some, like Khoramdareh, demonstrating commendable infrastructure, while others, such as Ijrood and Khodabandeh, lagged significantly behind. Such insights shed light on the nuanced challenges of tourism infrastructure development and suggest targeted interventions to enhance tourism readiness.

Vana and Malaescu (2016) conducted a comprehensive analysis of cultural thematic tourism itineraries, probing into the psychosocial underpinnings of cultural specifics within societies and their mediation of tourism activities. By scrutinizing factors like cultural openness, social distance, and traditionalism, they elucidated the nuanced dynamics shaping the success of cultural tourism initiatives. This analytical framework lays the groundwork for crafting culturally resonant tourism experiences that align with diverse societal contexts.

Seyedashrafi et al. (2017) rigorously examined the effects of heritage on urban development, focusing on the Jame Mosque of Isfahan as a case study. Through a systematic evaluation framework, they unraveled the multifaceted impacts of cultural assets on urban planning, offering insights into integrated development strategies that harmonize heritage preservation with sustainable urban growth. This approach facilitates informed decision-making among urban planners and cultural stakeholders.

Xu et al. (2017) explored the significance of the West Lake pattern in shaping China's heritage tourism economics, employing a holistic framework encompassing social, economic, and cultural dimensions. By dissecting aspects of tourism management, such as site protection, visitor management, and income distribution, they delineated strategies for optimizing heritage site tourism potential, while mitigating negative impacts. This analytical lens provides a comprehensive roadmap for sustainable heritage tourism development.

Griozard and Santanta-Gallego (2018) critically analyzed the demolition of cultural heritage sites in Arabic countries and its repercussions on international tourism. Quantifying the impact of the Arab Spring conflict on tourist numbers, they underscored the imperative of safeguarding cultural heritage as a driver of tourism resilience. This perspective sheds light on the complex interplay between geopolitical instability and tourism dynamics, guiding policy interventions to mitigate risks.

Beltramo, Peira, and Bonadonna (2021) scrutinized the integration of local stakeholders in tourism enhancement efforts, emphasizing coordinated action and stakeholder engagement to optimize tourism offerings. Their analysis highlighted the potential for targeted interventions in nature, culture, and gastronomy to bolster local tourism, underscoring the pivotal role of collaborative governance in fostering sustainable tourism development. This analytical framework offers actionable insights for fostering synergistic collaborations and maximizing the socio-economic benefits of tourism.

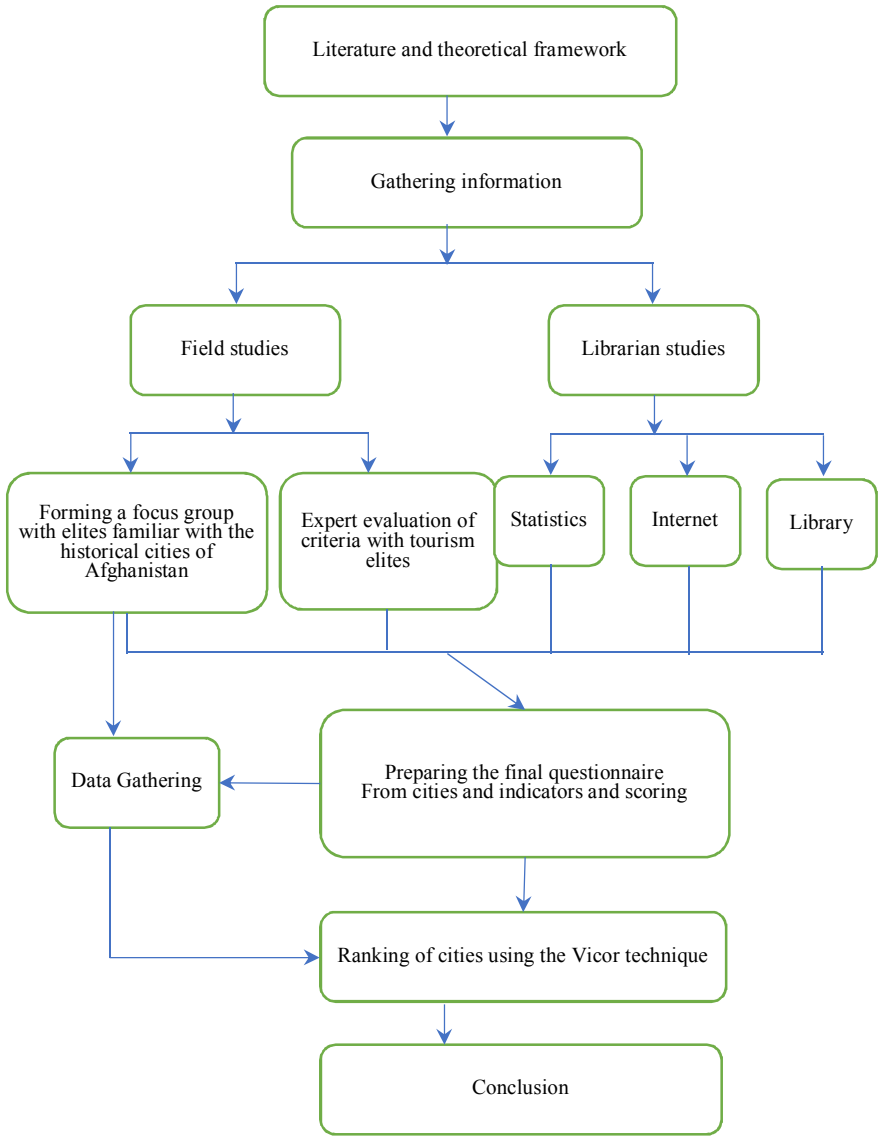
Through a review of the literature, it becomes apparent that tourism analysis in Afghanistan, particularly regarding historical cities, has been underexplored. There is a notable gap in research

focusing on introducing Afghanistan's historical cities and prioritizing them for tourism development.

4. Research Method

The present exploratory study is an applied investigation. Data collection was carried out using a field method through a researcher-designed questionnaire. Initially, Afghan cities were identified through library sources, the Internet, and field methods including questionnaires and interviews with knowledgeable individuals and specialists in tourism. Ultimately, 13 cities were identified as having the capacity to attract international tourists. In the subsequent stage, tourist attraction indices were identified. These indices were determined through a review of library sources and existing studies, resulting in 34 indices categorized into four general groups: 1) Socio-cultural factors, 2) Natural conditions (environmental), 3) Accommodation infrastructure and equipment, and 4) Communication and information infrastructure. The prioritization of historic cities was then performed using the Multi-Criteria Decision-Making (MCDM) technique of VIKOR, based on the scores provided by individuals knowledgeable about the environment and historic cities of Afghanistan. The study involved 25 experts selected through purposive sampling. All experts were Afghan nationals, most of whom had specialized in tourism or were employed in related fields in Afghanistan. The flowchart of the research process is presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2. The Flowchart of the Research Process



Source: Authors

5. Research Findings

5. 1. Identifying Historic Cities of Afghanistan

At this stage, a list of Afghan cities with historic tourism potential was compiled through references to library documents and sources. Many cities have undergone name changes over time, and some individuals may not be familiar with their former names or may not recognize them as historic cities due to their new names. Consequently, it was possible for city names to be duplicated, with some cities or regions having multiple names. Additionally, the famous name of a region might differ from the current name of the city, or a historically significant region may no longer be classified as a city. Furthermore, some cities that were once large and prosperous have since become villages or are now just ruins. However, they can still be considered historic cities if there are neighboring cities with a historical significance, and only remnants of the original cities remain. For example, the ruins of Ghegheleh, demolished by Genghis Khan and now in ruins, are still considered part of the historical context. Similarly, while Bamyan is a historic city, its neighboring city remains significant due to its past importance. The city of Balkh has also diminished to a small village, but Mazar-i-Sharif, located nearby, retains its status as a historic city. Lashgargah, near the historic site of Bost, can also be regarded as a historic city, although Bamyan and Mazar-i-Sharif themselves are historic and significant. Ultimately, names of 52 cities in Afghanistan with historical potential were gathered from various sources. For the next step, a questionnaire was designed for initial screening and to determine the most important cities for tourism development. The names of the cities were listed in the questionnaire, and individuals knowledgeable about Afghanistan and involved in tourism were asked to rate each city on a scale

from zero to ten based on its importance in historic tourism. A score of zero indicated the least importance, while a score of ten represented the highest importance. The mean scores obtained are as follows:

Table 1. Historic Cities of Afghanistan[1]

City	Mean	City	Mean	City	Mean	City	Mean
Bamyan	9.7	Arzgan	4.9	Mehtarlam	4	Terinkot	2.5
Heart	9	Charikar	4.8	Meimaneh	3.6	Eslamghale	2.5
Ghazni	8.5	Hazrat Imam	4.75	Neeli	3.5	Gharchigag	2.5
Mazar-i-Sharif	8.4	Farah	4.7	Chaghcharan	3.4	Goodrich	2.3
Kabul	7	Bughlan	4.6	Gardiz	3.4	Rustagh	2.3
Faizabad	6.1	Saraj Jabalul	4.6	Girishag	3.4	Mahmoodiraghi	2
Kandahar	5.9	Ghalehnow	4.5	Karrakh	3.3	Farkhar	2
Eibak	5.6	Balkh	4.3	Imamsaheb	3.25	Nahrein	1.6
Tlaleghan	5.3	Asadabad	4.3	Khust	3.2	Khondood	1.5
Jalal Abad	5.1	Bagram	4.25	Zaranj	3.2	Khanabad	1
Shaberghan	5.1	Sarpul	4.1	Khulam	3	Sharana	1
Pol Khameri	5	Ghonduz	4.1	Andkhoi	2.6	Sangeen	1
Lashgargah	5	Meidanshahr	4	Aghcheh	2.6	Tukzar	1

Source: Authors

As mentioned, 52 historical cities were identified in Afghanistan. It was necessary to reduce the number of these cities and identify the most important ones for a more detailed investigation. Based on the points given by the experts to each of these cities, the thirteen cities that had the most points are as follows:

1 . All points have been assigned to cities by experts through a questionnaire.

Bamyan, Herat, Ghazni, Mazar-i-Sharif, Kabul, Feizabad, Kandahar, Eibak, Talaghan, Jalalabad, Shabarghan, Pol Khomri, and Lashgargah.

5. 2. Indexes and Factors Influencing Attracting International Tourists in Historic Cities

In this stage, it was necessary to identify the characteristics and components affecting the branding of historical cities appropriate for developing tourism. Therefore, the above-mentioned indexes were collected using different library sources and interviews with experts familiar with tourism. As last, 34 factors in four groups were obtained as follows:

Table 2. Socio-Cultural Indexes for Attracting International Tourists

Indexes	Sources
1. Museums and art galleries	(Athari, 1391 [2012 A.D.]), (Ahmadi, 1394 [2015 A.D.]), (Asadullahzadeh, 1392 [2013 A.D.])
2. Ceremonies and festivals	(Eftekharian, 1392 [2013 A.D.]), (Omidi Khalaki, 1392 [2013 A.D.]), (Salehzadeh, 1393 [2014 A.D.])
3. Traditional foods	(Zamani Kasmani, 1394 [2014 A.D.])
4. Souvenirs	(Rahimi, 1393 [2015 A.D.])
5. Races and exports and scientific exhibitions	(Karkun, 1390 [2011 A.D.]), (Niromand Tumaj, 1393 [2014 A.D.])
6. Traditional sports and amusements	(Kahdoee, 1395 [2016 A.D.]), (Abulghasemtabar Gangi, 1388 [2009 A.D.])
7. Historical and religious places and neighborhoods	(Zare, 1395 [2016 A.D.]), (Manzari Tavakoli, 1391 [2012 A.D.]), (Fathali, 1392 [2013 A.D.])
8. Attractive and spectacular buildings	(Amiri Puya, 1393 [2014 A.D.]), (Taherkhani, 1389 [2010 A.D.])

Indexes	Sources
9. Shrines and tombs	(Zaraei Mazraechi, 1393 [2014 A.D.])
10. Historical gardens	(Shakibi, 1392 [2013 A.D.])
11. Music	(Ziari & Sadeghi, 2011), (Eftekharian, 2013)
12. Handicrafts	(Paksersht, 1393 [2014 A.D.]), (Daneshmand, 1394 [2015 A.D.])
13. Culture and language of people	(Amiri Puya, 1393 [2014 A.D.])
14. Hospitality skills	(Sayer, 1395 [2016 A.D.])
15. Language skills	(Rezapurian, 1391 [2012 A.D.])
16. Security	(Habibianpur, 1395 [2016 A.D.])

Table 3. Indexes of Natural Conditions (Environmental) for Attracting International Tourists

17. Rivers, lakes, forests, and natural sights.	(Mohammadi, 1394 [2015 A.D.]), (Sheikhi, 1391 [2012 A.D.])
18. Climate (weather)	(Ghavidel Sumesaraee, 1392 [2014 A.D.]), (Elahi, 1392 [2013 A.D.])

Table 4. Indexes of the Residential Infrastructure and Equipment for Attracting International Tourists

19. Parks and recreational centers	(Babashahi, 1391 [2013 A.D.])
20. Residential centers including hotel apartments, boarding houses, pilgrimage houses, etc.	(Naderi, 1393 [2013 A.D.]), (Saedi, 1393 [2013 A.D.])
21. Water closet (WC)	(Razm, 1395 [2016 A.D.])
22. Hygienic water	(Kheirollahi, 1395 [2016 A.D.])
23. Health and hygiene center	(Teimuri, 1394 [2015 A.D.])

24. Medical specialty centers	(Adhami, 1394 [2015 A.D.]), (Goudarzi, M. (1393 [2014 A.D.])
25. Groceries	(Abshar, 1391 [2012 A.D.])
26. Restaurants	(Shahzamani, 1393 [2014 A.D.])
27. Shopping centers	(Eivazi Gharamaleki et al., 1392 [2013 A.D.])

Table 5. Indexes of Communicative and Information Infrastructures for Attracting International Tourists

28. Appropriate Transportation	(Mirhosseini, 1390 [2011 A.D.]), (Baghal Azardoost, 2010), (Sulbi, 2015)
29. Access to Vehicles	(Mirhosseini, 1390 [2011 A.D.]), (Sulbi, 1394 [2015 A.D.])
30. Inter-way welfare and service complexes	(Vakili Fard, 1395 [2016 A.D.])
31. Internet, mobile, and mass media	(Yousefi, 1392 [2013 A.D.]), (Amu Ali Khosroabadi, 1392 [2013 A.D.])
32. Access to urban and tourism information	(Rashidi, 1391 [2012 A.D.])
33. Marketing and advertisement	(Alizadeh, 1393 [2014 A.D.]), (Golestaneh, 1396 [2017 A.D.])
34. Office of Travel and Tourism Services	(Jowhari, 1393 [2014 A.D.]), (Shahrabi, 1393 [2014 A.D.]), (Purhosseini, 1395 [2016 A.D.])

5.3. Prioritization of Afghanistan Cities to Attract International Tourists

As mentioned earlier, the thirteen most important cities of Afghanistan are as follows: Bamyan, Herat, Ghazni, Mazar-i-Sharif, Kabul, Feizabad, Kandahar, Eibak, Talaghan, Jalalabad, Shabarghan, Pol Khomri, and Lashgargah.

At this stage, a questionnaire was prepared, in which 25 experts

were asked to determine the situation of the above-mentioned 34 criteria for each of the thirteen cities, and assign scores (points) to them. In this way, an initial matrix was provided for the multi-criteria decision-making process using the VIKOR technique. In Table 6, the score and situation of each of the selected cities in the field of the 34 criteria mentioned, have been presented.

Table 6. The Situation of Selected Cities of Afghanistan Based on 34 Indexes of International Tourism Given to Experts[1]

Cities and indexes	Kabul	Bamyan	Herat	Mazar-i-Sharif	Ghazni	Kandahar	Eibak	Jalalabad	Polkhamri	Lashgargah	Taleghan	Shabarghan	Feizabad
1. Museums and art Galleries	228	198	203	181	190	141	108	118	108	97	94	91	93
Rank in index (1)	1	3	2	5	4	6	8	7	8	9	10	12	11
2. Ceremonies and festivals	228	225	212	222	188	150	120	134	121	112	96	106	110
Rank in index (2)	1	2	4	3	5	6	9	7	8	10	13	12	11
3. Traditional foods	228	218	210	222	207	158	131	149	133	141	123	132	129
Rank in index (3)	1	3	4	2	5	6	11	7	9	8	13	10	12
4. Souvenirs	193	197	198	204	194	155	130	132	127	128	131	109	107
Rank in index (4)	5	3	2	1	4	6	9	7	11	10	8	12	13
5. Races and sports and scientific exhibitions	235	208	216	201	163	141	111	122	115	105	97	111	108
Rank in index (5)	1	3	2	4	5	6	9	7	8	11	12	9	10
6. Sports and traditional entertainments	205	206	201	208	181	154	115	130	127	125	116	129	111
Rank in index (6)	3	2	4	1	5	6	12	7	9	10	11	8	13
7. Historic and religious places and neighborhoods	228	141	240	225	229	178	141	150	148	140	128	122	108
Rank in index (7)	3	1	2	5	4	6	9	7	8	10	11	12	13
8. Attractive and spectacular buildings	235	166	208	202	165	148	102	127	115	118	96	114	106
Rank in index (8)	1	4	2	3	5	6	12	7	9	8	13	10	11
9. Shrines and tombs	221	192	224	234	215	155	107	125	93	106	84	77	77
Rank in index (9)	3	5	2	1	4	6	8	7	10	9	11	12	12
10. Historical gardens	220	138	211	201	171	158	110	143	106	101	105	103	100

1 . All points have been assigned to cities by experts through a questionnaire.

Cities and indexes	Kabul	Bamyan	Herat	Mazar-i-Sharif	Ghazni	Kandahar	Eibak	Jalalabad	Polkhamri	Lashgargah	Taleghan	Shabarghan	Feizabad
Rank in index (10)	1	7	2	3	4	5	8	6	9	12	10	11	13
11. Music	228	207	218	214	170	159	118	132	128	107	113	110	111
Rank in index (11)	1	4	2	3	5	6	9	7	8	13	10	12	11
12. Handicrafts	197	214	211	201	196	166	123	127	123	107	105	119	115
Rank in index (12)	4	1	2	3	5	6	7	8	9	12	13	10	11
13. Culture and language of people	229	223	216	206	199	158	140	143	126	120	121	126	131
Rank in index (13)	1	2	3	4	5	6	8	7	10	12	11	10	9
14. Hospitality skills	230	223	220	223	216	166	142	154	156	137	157	143	128
Rank in index (14)	1	2	3	2	4	5	10	8	7	11	6	9	12
15. Language skills	235	190	211	211	202	152	159	161	142	132	130	131	136
Rank in index (15)	1	4	2	2	3	7	6	5	8	10	12	11	9
16. Security	157	227	197	204	98	129	132	128	110	91	120	122	125
Rank in index (16)	4	1	3	2	12	7	5	6	11	13	10	9	8
17. Rivers, lakes, forests, and natural sights	166	223	202	196	166	163	138	177	159	134	137	133	138
Rank in index (17)	5	1	2	3	5	6	8	4	7	10	9	11	8
18. Climate(weather)	159	230	203	194	177	151	156	176	161	161	154	145	142
Rank in index (18)	7	1	2	3	4	10	8	5	6	6	9	11	12
19. Parks and Recreational centers	197	174	202	195	129	141	101	138	119	105	93	94	91
Rank in index (19)	2	4	1	3	7	5	10	6	8	9	12	11	13
20. Residential centers including hotel apartments, Boarding houses, Pilgrimage houses, etc.	237	192	228	218	161	174	118	155	126	112	101	108	101
Rank in index (20)	1	4	2	3	6	5	9	7	8	10	12	11	12
21. Water closet (WC)	169	128	175	168	126	101	93	108	90	79	75	84	72
Rank in index (21)	2	4	1	3	5	7	8	6	9	11	12	10	13
22. Hygienic water	146	165	162	164	128	122	96	120	112	105	104	110	120
Rank in index (22)	4	1	3	2	5	6	12	7	8	10	11	9	7
23. Health Clinics	197	145	194	183	138	133	105	111	98	108	97	109	89
Rank in index (23)	1	4	2	3	5	6	10	7	11	9	12	8	13
24. Medical specialty centers	198	131	173	160	125	117	76	96	83	79	75	87	73
Rank in index (24)	1	4	2	3	5	6	11	7	9	10	12	8	13
25. Groceries	225	170	215	209	155	164	179	159	124	125	115	123	110
Rank in index (25)	1	5	2	3	8	6	4	7	10	9	12	11	13
26. Restaurants	240	192	226	208	164	151	117	130	121	99	100	107	98

Cities and indexes	Kabul	Bamyan	Herat	Mazar-i-Sharif	Ghazni	Kandahar	Eibak	Jalalabad	Polkhamri	Lashgargah	Taleghan	Shabarghan	Feizabad
Rank in index(26)	1	4	2	3	5	6	9	7	8	12	11	10	13
27. Shopping centers	246	157	228	209	166	169	120	141	120	112	103	110	95
Rank in index (27)	1	6	2	3	5	4	8	7	8	9	11	10	12
28. Appropriate Transportation	218	159	212	210	167	174	115	139	122	115	96	102	99
Rank in index (28)	1	6	2	3	5	4	9	7	8	9	12	10	11
29. Access to Vehicles	219	152	223	201	160	176	125	150	131	123	98	107	98
Rank in index (29)	2	6	1	3	5	4	9	7	8	10	12	11	12
30. Inter-way welfare and service complexes	185	148	187	170	129	134	104	109	99	85	78	86	77
Rank in index(30)	2	4	1	3	6	5	8	7	9	11	12	10	13
31. Internet, Mobile, and Mass media	246	194	232	230	189	191	151	167	142	135	122	139	124
Rank in index(31)	1	4	2	3	6	5	8	7	9	11	13	10	12
32. Access to urban and tourism Information	178	163	182	162	131	112	93	112	93	92	76	75	66
Rank in index (32)	2	3	1	4	5	6	7	6	7	8	9	10	11
33. Marketing and advertisement	213	161	201	179	141	136	109	115	102	92	83	89	80
Rank in index (33)	1	4	2	3	5	6	8	7	9	10	12	11	13
34. offices of Travel and Tourism	207	168	213	192	133	125	91	105	90	89	77	79	70
Rank in index (34)	2	4	1	3	5	6	8	7	9	10	12	11	13

According to the stages and calculations of the VIKOR Technique, finally, a Q coefficient for each choice between zero and one was obtained. The less the Q number, the higher is the city's priority. As illustrated in Table (7), Herat City with a score of 0.060562 obtained the highest priority and the cities of Kabul and Bamyan were ranked second and third, respectively.

Table 7. Scores of the Selected Cities of Afghanistan Based on VIKOR Calculations and Ranking to Develop International Tourism

Q	0.004789	0.065259	0.134337	0.159406	0.427347	0.669893	0.720365
Rank	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
City	Herat	Kabul	Mamyan	Mazar-i-Sharif	Ghazni	Taleghan	Kandahar
Q	0.750219	0.757087	0.793737	0.832348	0.918046	1	
Rank	8	9	10	11	12	13	
City	Eibak	Lashkargah	polkhamri	Jalalabad	Shabarghan	Feizabad	

Source: Authors' Calculations Extracted from the Questionnaires

6. Conclusion

The challenges that Afghanistan faces in developing its tourism sector are substantial. These challenges include ongoing security concerns, political instability, insufficient infrastructure, lack of promotional and marketing efforts, limited access to financing, and negative international perceptions due to past conflicts and current uncertainties. Additionally, the country's rugged terrain and remote locations pose logistical difficulties for tourism development. Despite its rich cultural heritage and natural beauty, Afghanistan struggles to attract tourists because of these obstacles. Addressing these challenges is crucial for unlocking the country's tourism potential and fostering sustainable development in the sector.

However, given Afghanistan's potential, there is hope for tourism development. For a country that has been significantly hindered by decades of unrest, starting from a foundational point is necessary. This involves identifying various sections of tourism, with international tourism being a particularly important aspect

from social, economic, and cultural perspectives. Economically, it can drive rapid growth, especially in low-income countries. Socially and culturally, it can enhance security and foster cultural interaction.

Historically, Afghanistan has been noted by kings and merchants, with a section of the Silk Road passing through this land. Cities such as Bamyan, Balkh, Herat, Kabul, Ghazni, and others were once markers of prosperity. Many people are interested in studying the history of these cities, making them potential attractions for tourism. However, due to limited resources, it is not feasible to simultaneously develop tourism in all cities. Therefore, identifying and prioritizing the most significant cities is necessary. In this study, 52 cities were initially identified, and 13 top cities were further analyzed. Their priorities were determined using 34 indices and the VIKOR technique. The results indicate that Herat ranks first in attracting international tourists, followed by Kabul, Mazar-i-Sharif, Kandahar, Bamyan, Ghazni, Jalal Abad, Lashkargah, Eibak, Pol Khamri, Taleghan, Sheberghan, and Feizabad, respectively.

Each historical city in Afghanistan has distinct advantages for tourism. A city may excel in one aspect, but have weaknesses in others. Despite Herat's top ranking, it does not necessarily lead in all aspects of tourism. For instance:

- In the socio-cultural factors group, Herat ranks first, followed by Kabul, Kandahar, Mazar-i-Sharif, Bamyan, Ghazni, Jalal Abad, Lashkargah, Eibak, Pol Khamri, Feizabad, Sheberghan, and Taleghan.
- In natural and environmental conditions, Bamyan ranks first, followed by Feizabad, Mazar-i-Sharif, Pol Khamri, Herat, Jalal

Abad, Kabul, Kandahar, Ghazni, Sheberghan, Taleghan, Eibak, and Lashkargah.

- In residential infrastructure and equipment, Kabul ranks first, followed by Herat, Mazar-i-Sharif, Ghazni, Pol Khamri, Kandahar, Bamyan, Jalal Abad, Sheberghan, Taleghan, Feizabad, Lashkargah, and Eibak.
- In communication and information infrastructure, Herat ranks first, followed by Kabul, Bamyan, Mazar-i-Sharif, Ghazni, Taleghan, Kandahar, Eibak, Lashkargah, Pol Khamri, Jalal Abad, Sheberghan, and Feizabad.

Tourism managers in each city can improve the tourism situation by addressing the areas where their cities rank lower. For example, Feizabad has a lower rank in socio-cultural and communication infrastructure but performs well in natural conditions. By prioritizing improvements in socio-cultural factors and communication infrastructure, tourism can be enhanced.

Given that Herat ranks first in attracting international tourism, identifying its weaknesses is crucial for improving its tourism position and establishing it as a global tourist destination. Although Herat has a relatively good standing in the socio-cultural group, it lags in areas such as festivals, traditional foods, sports, and entertainment. Additionally, the city's access to hygienic water is relatively weak. Addressing these issues with both public and private sector involvement is essential.

Therefore, it is recommended that those developing international tourism focus on the strengths and weaknesses, opportunities, and threats related to Herat. Strategic planning should aim to advance Afghanistan's tourism sector. It is important to note that resources

on Afghanistan are scarce, and this research primarily provides general information about the country's historical cities. The study's contribution lies in ranking and introducing cities with tourism potential to facilitate tourism development.

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