



## How to boost Pakistan's tourism industry: Lessons to learn from China

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Sino-Pakistani relations have reached a historic-high level nowadays. Under such robust cooperation between the two countries, China, the second largest economy, is a good template for Pakistan that has many merits needed to be learned by Pakistan, especially in terms of tourism. Pakistan has splendid resources ranging from natural resources such as valleys, lakes, beaches, and deserts to cultural resources, for instance, mosques, forts, and heritages, which gives it great potential to benefit its tourism industry and economy. In 2019, travel and tourism contributed 5.7% of the GDP and provided 5.5% of total jobs in Pakistan ([Travel & Council, 2021](#)). Although the tourism industry, an emerging, green, sustainable, and energetic industry, could be an excellent panacea for Pakistan, there are other priorities besides developing the tourism industry for Pakistan's government. The tourism industry faces significant challenges due to poor infrastructure, lack of transportation, security risks, low-quality services, and political uncertainty. On the other hand, China's tourism market has been achieving a high-speed increase and has become one of the most important sectors of its economy.

In 2019, the direct tourism GDP in China accounted for 11.05% of its GDP, and tourism's direct and indirect employment-population reached 79.87 million people. China also aimed to advance its tourism industry in terms of ocean tours, rural tours, aviation tours, and e-tours, and drew up a specific chapter for tourism development in its outline of the 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-2025) for national economic and social development and the long-range objectives through the year 2035. Benefiting from steadfast Sino-Pakistani ties at both political and nongovernmental levels and the "Belt and Road" initiative, Pakistan should seize the opportunity to realize a long-term increase in the tourism sector by learning from its partners. Most scholars have summarized that the significant tourism problems faced by Pakistan include a lack of government attention, a shortage of infrastructure, and security issues, among others. Those problems are complex, costly, and chronic and cannot be improved quickly. This paper analyzed the most urgent tourism challenges and provided suggestions from the Sino-Pakistani perspective that can be easily implemented and benefit the country.

First and foremost, Pakistan needs systematic tourism statistics. The tourism data is counted by a third party, the World Travel Tourism Council (WTTC), and has yet to be officially adopted by the United Nations World Tourism Organization and the World Bank, which may be integral and inaccurate. Due to the need for a scientific, continuous statistical system, the progress of market analysis, forecasting, tourism research, and even policymaking and investment is hindered, leading to inadequate attention from the government, domestic entrepreneurs, and foreign investors. Secondly, to promote sustainable economic growth, the Pakistani government should focus more on inbound tourists than on domestic tourists, and there is still much room for improvement in marketing and promotion. In 2019, 48% of inbound tourists came from the United Kingdom and the United States; in contrast, 9% came from India and 7% from China (36% of them came from the rest of the world). However, according to the gravity model, GDP and population in the origin country, short distance between origin and destination, and sharing a common religion significantly and positively impact inbound tourism. Populous and adjacent countries, such as China and India, should be Pakistan's top-origin inbound tourism market, reflecting Pakistan's need to implement more accurate marketing policies to expand its inbound tourism market. Thirdly, studies showed that a visa-free agreement greatly benefits the tourism sector,

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while accessibility to Pakistan needs to be improved. Pakistan grants visa-free entry to only 5 countries and an ETA (electronic travel authorization) to citizens of 64 countries. ETA coverage still needs to be expanded, and Pakistan also needs to explore more visa-free cross-border tourism regions with its adjacent countries.

Although Pakistan has abundant tourism resources, the development of tourist attractions is insufficient. Most tourist attractions are natural, historical, or religious sites, but they need to be better exploited. The local government could not convert its prosperous history and vivid culture into tourism value-added, and the power of its cultural value in the tourism sector needed to be released. In addition, it is expected that natural tourism sites are still at the initial stage, and service facilities need further development; for example, service centres, roads, restrooms, signs, and transportation systems need to be supplemented and updated. Moreover, the lack of high-quality, high-end tourism products, such as theme parks, resorts, air tours, and sailing, has limited dynamic growth in Pakistan.

The Pakistanis are very friendly and hospitable, and there is a fact that the political ecology, security, and stability in Pakistan have been drastically improved, which provides a solid foundation for the tourism industry ([Travel & Council, 2021](#)). However, the government did less work on establishing a steady tourism brand and polishing its own advertisements, and promoting activities, events, and exchanges are rarely seen on the global stage. The tourism industry's supply chain includes transportation, infrastructure, accommodations, travel agents, food & drink, crafts, arts, activities, performances, and events. The expansion and fusion in these areas need further efforts in Pakistan. Finally, the exploitation of "New Era" applications such as online platforms, big data, New Media, and We Media is deficient in Pakistan. Nowadays, the applications mentioned above have paved the way for robust expansion of the supply-and-demand channel for tourism. For various reasons, popular apps such as TikTok have been temporarily or permanently banned, hampering the tourism promotion process. In short, the problems listed above are critical but easier to address in the short term than other common issues.

As one of Pakistan's most intimate partners, the second-largest economy, and a colossal tourism destination, China is an ideal model for Pakistan's tourism development. To be clear, although there are many good examples of tourism development in China, it also faces problems, such as overdevelopment, product homogenization, and travel restrictions, and we focus only on the merits. China followed international standards and established a sophisticated tourism statistics system that guarantees a reliable data source for policymaking and investment. For instance, it implements regular tourism surveys, including telephone, face-to-face, and online surveys at the national, provincial, and city levels. It also runs a tourism satellite account to estimate the direct and indirect tourism GDP. Authorities also pursue international exchanges and actively expand their inbound market. Each year, national and provincial cultural and tourism departments hold numerous overseas promotional activities and events, twin tourism cities, and launch a tourism year to boost international cooperation and the inbound tourism market. In addition, their targets are towns or countries close to China or developed countries. In addition to extending its free visa policy, China has established cross-border visa-free zones with neighboring countries, such as Mongolia, Russia, and Vietnam, allowing tourists to visit, shop, and travel without a visa for a specified period.

In 2018, China integrated its tourism department with a cultural department and made great efforts to promote tourism by imbuing it with greater cultural value. Cultural elements have been adequately merged into the tourism sector. To facilitate integration between the tourism and cultural industries, authorities encourage museums, theatres, art galleries, and heritage sites to attract tourists by developing tourist products and providing tourism services, thereby enhancing tourists' satisfaction and experience. In 2004, China established an assessment framework, the Standards for Grade A Tourist Attractions ([Qiu et al., 2021](#)), to guide investors in developing necessary service facilities, including multilingual signs and commentaries. It also holds a 6-year "Toilet Revolution" everywhere in China to facilitate tourism. To meet various demands, authorities continue to develop high-end products in the tourism sector, such as customized services, aviation tours, ski & snowboarding tours, sailing, skydiving, hot-air balloon tours, winery tours, and extravagant camping, among others. In addition, they also provide attractive subsidies and low-interest loans to emerging projects, and Pakistan can refer to such policies. China sets up tourism offices in most countries doing advertisements, promotions, and other marketing activities. It also officially and regularly organizes international summer camps with other countries and sends its tourism envoys to enhance tourism exchange. In the latest Five-Year



Tourism Development Plan (2020-2025), the Chinese authorities have issued a bundle of policies to prolong the tourism value chain. It encourages investors, governmental artists, and acting institutions to supplement performances, intangible heritage shows, and cultural events at tourist attractions. It also supports innovative SMEs in investing in or engaging in tourism by providing almost rent-free workshops. It also fuses tourism with agriculture, processing, mining, and other sectors. For instance, entrepreneurs and farmers offer mini-farm programs, the heaviest tour, and idyllic rural accommodations ([Gao et al., 2022](#)) to attract city dwellers to travel to the countryside more frequently. Companies convert their abandoned mines into hot spots, educating tourists about geology and mining history, which has received lots of attention. Noteworthy, entrepreneurs, stakeholders, and internet celebrities play a crucial role in promoting local tourism in this "information era." It is common in China for one internet celebrity, famed for a little-known spot after a live-streaming appearance one night, to bring millions of tourists and boost the region's GDP ([Liu et al., 2022](#)). Even some local government leaders signed up accounts to live-stream their hometowns, introduce their landscapes and customs, sell specialties and gifts, and promote their tourism routes and attractions, which also attracted significant responses. In short, China has already explored several effective ways (beyond the aforementioned measures) for Pakistan to boost its tourism.

Following China's demonstration, the Pakistani government must first establish an integrated statistical system. The government should designate a specific department to manage and conduct tourism surveys and statistics, promote data-sharing cooperation with departments such as transportation, meteorology, finance, commerce, and statistics, and provide accurate, integrated data and industry reports to policymakers, investors, and tourists. It should also establish a Big Data platform to collect and analyze tourism trends, preferences, and patterns, monitor tourism flows, and calculate the carrying capacity of attractions. The government must also encourage research institutions, colleges, and universities to advance tourism research and industrial analysis. In addition, the government needs to focus on promotion in primary markets. It's better to gradually expand its free-visa policy to countries that are members of the Commonwealth of Nations, the Economic Cooperation Organization, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Belt and Road Initiative, and Islamic nations. Meanwhile, the Pakistan government should explore cross-border visa-free policies with neighbouring countries, optimize the mutual recognition of driving licenses, and establish free trade zones and tourism routes that allow tourists from neighboring countries to enjoy duty-free shopping, self-driving travel, and short-term tours without a visa.

A 72-hour visa waiver for transit passengers at international airports also needs to be considered. One of the most outstanding tourism resources in Pakistan is its flamboyant culture. With religious permission, governments should encourage their sacred places to host international tourists, allowing them to understand their cultural significance and engage in cultural ceremonies. They should also introduce their cuisines, performances, arts, and lifestyles, and present their traditions and customs to international tourists. The government should also subsidize and incentivize filmmakers, actors, artists, and craftspeople to develop cultural products associated with tourism, thereby diversifying tourism experiences and services. Prompting museums and tangible and intangible heritage sites to facilitate international archaeology cooperation, design artistic souvenirs, and digitize their treasures is essential to tourism. The service facilities are fundamental. The government should establish standards and ranking systems for hotels, homestays, restaurants, travel agents, and tourist attractions, and provide targeted subsidies to encourage SMEs to upgrade their facilities and services. In the meantime, the government should ensure public facilities such as service centres, restrooms, tourism signs, viewing decks, internet accessibility, and self-driving camps, and explore Public-Private Partnerships to attract private capital to participate in public construction, which not only benefits tourism but also improves local welfare.

Pakistan has many breathtaking mountains and valleys, gorgeous beaches and lakes, and fantastic forests and glaciers, which are among its advantages, but its upscale tourism development is weak. Authorities should exploit skydiving and helicopter tours in plain areas, develop camping sites and ski resorts in mountainous regions, cultivate drift and sailing activities, and foster excursion and exploration tours. Although small groups of tourists engage in these activities, these kinds of businesses are lucrative and can satisfy diverse tastes. Concertedly promoting the national image is necessary, and tourism is a perfect channel to uphold and strengthen it. Each year, the Pakistani government subsidizes thousands of international students to different

countries; it's a good channel for tourism promotion. The government should launch the "Tourism Envoy" program and train its subsidized international students to promote tourism resources overseas positively. It should also forge a prominent tourism brand, design multilingual tourism guidebooks, establish overseas tourism marketing centres in its main inbound markets, and hold international tourism exhibitions regularly to draw attention and alter global stereotypes. There is vast potential to extend the tourism value chain in Pakistan. Authorities should establish tourism industry bases and launch pilot projects to inspire natives to engage in tourism product innovation and creation, such as gifts, souvenirs, crafts, and arts. In addition, Pakistan is one of the most agriculturally intensive countries, with more than half of the population and land involved in agriculture.

It has comparative advantages in developing agricultural tourism. The government should improve the environment in rural areas and guide peasants to cater to tourists by providing harvest experiences, mini farm tenancy, and idyllic theme homestays. Encouraging the application of new tech is crucial. Nowadays, We Media, New Media, and other online platforms have dominated the market, enabling every stakeholder to access them and promote and sell their products with just a smartphone. The government should motivate stakeholders, especially the disadvantaged groups, to market their tourism products abroad via favorite apps. To be as specific as possible, stakeholders should focus on Chinese markets, collaborate with Chinese net celebrities, develop tourism resources, and export specialties such as jade, gems, and wool that are attractive to Chinese tourists.

To sum up, there are plenty of paths to thrive in the tourism sector, but there is no "one size fits all" method for tourism development. Drawing on the Chinese approach, this perspective aimed to summarize practical, effective measures that can be quickly adopted and benefit tourism in the short term, and to enlighten Pakistani authorities on how to boost their tourism.

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