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***SMALL TOWNS OF THE TURKESTAN REGION: AS A FACTOR OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF TOURISM IN THE REGION***

**Abstract.** *This review article investigates the significance of small towns within the Turkestan region of Kazakhstan as pivotal catalysts for advancing sustainable tourism practices. The Turkestan region, located at the intersection of Central Asia's abundant historical and cultural legacy, presents distinctive prospects for tourism that can facilitate local economic enhancement, safeguard cultural identity, and ensure environmental conservation. By concentrating on the contributions of small towns to tourism development, the article scrutinizes how these communities can capitalize on their historical importance, natural landscapes, and indigenous traditions to formulate sustainable tourism frameworks. The article evaluates many challenges and opportunities these towns face in fostering tourism, encompassing the necessity for infrastructure enhancement, community involvement, and the safeguarding of cultural heritage. Through theoretical research, it is evident that small towns within the Turkestan region have the potential to function as sustainable tourism centers. This provides benefits for both the resident populations and the broader geographic area while promoting enduring economic viability and the conservation of cultural heritage. The results underscore the significance of cohesive strategies, encompassing ecotourism, heritage conservation, and local entrepreneurial activities, as fundamental elements of a sustainable tourism paradigm for small towns in this historically significant and culturally diverse region.*

**Keywords:** *small towns, Turkestan region, sustainable tourism, economic enhancement, cultural identity.*

**Introduction**

Currently, several characteristics and development trends play an important role in shaping sustainable tourism in any state. Such features of sustainable tourism development should contribute to the accelerated development of the region and the economy as a whole. The economy of the region develops not only at the expense of large cities but also at the expense of small towns.

The Turkestan region, situated in southern Kazakhstan, is a territory imbued with historical significance, cultural richness, and extraordinary natural landscapes. Characterized by its varied

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topography, which encompasses expansive deserts and towering mountains, alongside a legacy molded by centuries of cultural interchange along the Silk Road, the region possesses substantial potential for the development of initiatives for sustainable tourism. Among the region's most distinguished resources are its small towns—charming yet dynamic centers of indigenous culture and tradition. These towns such as Kentau, Shardara, Arys frequently disregarded in favor of more prominent urban centers, present distinctive opportunities for the promotion of tourism that honors the environment, safeguards local customs, and encourages community enhancement.

In recent years, there has been an increasing acknowledgment of the significant role that small towns can fulfill in the overarching development of tourism. In contrast to large metropolitan areas, which are often inundated by mass tourism, small towns provide a more personal, genuine experience that resonates with travelers who seek to engage with local cultures, landscapes, and historical narratives. As tourism evolves into an increasingly pivotal sector for the regional economy, the small towns of Turkestan emerge as crucial contributors to the promotion of sustainable tourism practices. By capitalizing on their distinctive attributes—whether they pertain to indigenous crafts, vibrant cultural customs, or unspoiled natural settings—these towns are strategically positioned to facilitate the sustained growth of tourism in the region while concurrently ensuring the safeguarding of their cultural and ecological legacies.

This article investigates the potential of small towns within the Turkestan region as a catalyst for sustainable tourism development. By analyzing the opportunities and challenges that these towns encounter, we aim to underscore how they can be integrated into a comprehensive strategy for regional development that yields benefits for both local residents and visitors while preserving a delicate equilibrium between economic advancement and environmental stewardship.

On September 14, 2024, a thematic session entitled "Big Trip to Small Towns" convened in Moscow as part of the international tourism forum and exhibition "Leisure." The primary objective of this conference was to explore the potential of small towns in the context of tourism advancement and to delineate the opportunities for establishing sustainable tourism through the development of a tourist brand for these locales. Moreover, during the conference, esteemed scholars and professionals within the tourism industry exchanged their insights and deliberated upon strategies for enhancing small towns nationwide to foster sustainable tourism [1]. The significance of the research subject is intricately connected to the critical necessity of harnessing the potential of small municipalities, as deliberated at this conference, to act as a driving force for the development of sustainable tourism.

The article explores the role of small towns in the Turkestan region of Kazakhstan as a pivotal factor in the sustainable development of tourism. While much attention has been given to large urban centers or specific tourist attractions, this study introduces an innovative perspective by highlighting the unique potential of small towns often overlooked in fostering a more sustainable, community-driven model of tourism.

The scientific novelty of this work lies in its interdisciplinary approach, which integrates tourism studies, regional development, and environmental sustainability. It proposes a framework for leveraging the historical, cultural, and ecological assets of small towns to create diversified tourism products that contribute to the economic resilience of the region while preserving local identity and environmental integrity.

By presenting a fresh perspective on the potential of small towns in driving sustainable tourism, this article contributes to the broader discourse on regional development and sustainable tourism in

Central Asia, offering a comprehensive, region-specific model that can be adapted to other similar regions globally.

The object of this research is the small urban towns within the Turkestan region and the contemporary tourism potential inherent in these small towns.

The subject of this study is the significance of small towns within the Turkestan region of Kazakhstan as essential contributors to the sustainable advancement of tourism. The inquiry is centered on examining the extent to which these towns, characterized by their distinctive cultural heritage, local customs, and natural environments, can function as crucial factors in the expansion of tourism while concurrently ensuring ecological sustainability, socio-economic advantages for local populations, and the conservation of regional identity. Particular emphasis is placed on the obstacles and prospects that small towns encounter in their efforts to become integral elements of the region's comprehensive tourism infrastructure and development strategy.

The objective of this article is to investigate the potential of small towns situated within the Turkestan region of Kazakhstan as pivotal agents for the advancement of sustainable tourism development. This study aims to clarify how these towns can capitalize on their distinctive cultural, historical, and natural resources to enhance the growth of a tourism sector that is ecologically sustainable, socially equitable, and economically advantageous for local communities. By examining the challenges and opportunities that these towns encounter, the article seeks to propose feasible strategies for promoting sustainable tourism while safeguarding the region's cultural identity and natural heritage.

According to this aim the following tasks were set:

1) to identify the unique cultural, historical, and natural assets of small towns: Examine the distinctive characteristics of small towns in Turkestan, encompassing their historical importance, cultural practices, and natural landmarks, which may serve as a foundational basis for fostering sustainable tourism development.

2) to explore sustainable tourism strategies and best practices: Investigate both global and regional exemplars of sustainable tourism initiatives within small towns, and identify best practices that could be effectively tailored to fit the specific context of the Turkestan region.

3) to propose a framework for integrating small towns into regional tourism development plans: Formulate a series of strategic recommendations for local governments, tourism stakeholders, and community members regarding the incorporation of small towns into the regional tourism development strategy, with a focus on achieving a harmonious balance between economic growth and sustainability.

4) to examine the role of local communities in tourism development: Analyze the ways in which residents of small towns and local stakeholders can actively engage in the planning, development, and management of tourism-related activities, ensuring that the benefits of tourism are equitably distributed and culturally appropriate.

This study hypothesizes that the small towns of the Turkestan region possess significant untapped potential to serve as sustainable tourism destinations, contributing to the region's economic development while preserving its cultural heritage and natural environment. Specifically, it is hypothesized that with targeted strategies for tourism development, these small towns can balance the demands of growth with environmental and socio-cultural sustainability. By focusing on local assets such as historical landmarks, traditional crafts, and natural landscapes, small towns in Turkestan can create tourism experiences that are both economically beneficial and

environmentally responsible, ultimately contributing to the long-term sustainable development of the region's tourism sector.

Furthermore, it is hypothesized that the active involvement of local communities in the planning and management of tourism will enhance the positive impacts of tourism on social cohesion, employment, and regional identity while minimizing the risks of over-tourism and cultural erosion.

City branding in small cities is increasingly recognized as a vital strategy for enhancing tourism and local identity. By leveraging unique cultural, historical, and social resources, small cities can create distinct brands that attract visitors and foster community pride. This approach not only enhances the city's image but also promotes sustainable economic growth.

According to Kasemsarn engaging vernacular settlements through creative tourism can significantly enhance city branding efforts, allowing cities to showcase their unique cultural heritage. Also, strategies such as architectural preservation and community involvement are essential for integrating local culture into the branding process [2].

According to Belyaeva O. I. a strategic approach to branding emphasizes the importance of aligning branding efforts with local tourism potential [3]. They proved that the use of internet-based communication strategies can effectively promote small city brands, utilizing emotional and evaluative tactics to engage audiences.

According to E.Mihardja and etc. tourism potential can be integrated into city branding. In this case, stakeholders' efforts needed to guard and formulate tourism potential. The local government has to build a brand for the development of cities [4]. Integrating tourism potential is key for city branding. His survey results showed positive perceptions of tourism potential. Respondents felt that tourist attractions were appropriate sites for city branding, but management and promotion should be improved.

According to Andriani Kusumawati well developed cities can be characterized by competence in brand personality. City branding plays a key role as a concept for regional tourism development. However, there was a lack of readiness from the government in mapping the area and the concept of tourism in cities [5].

According to Mercedes Mareque and others small cities have positive features for fostering creative tourism. Creative tourism is a potential economic and social driver for small cities [6].

Andrea Lorena Arteaga Flórez proved that city branding is an effective key for tourism promotion and urban development. That is why city branding must be regulated by all of society. The development of small towns can be identified with potential tourist sites and important city attributes [7].

Serpil Ünal Kestane researched that Koprubasi's branding needs modernization and rejuvenation. Agricultural products, moreover strawberries are key promotional qualities in the formation of sustainable development of small towns. He conducted a study on small cities for brand identity development, also made a focus on creating emotional bonds with target audience through branding. In this context local people perceive Koprubasi as a brand of agricultural products. Kestane's study aimed to help small cities create brand identity [8].

Researchers Dina M. Weheba, Mohamed A. Nassar researched to develop the "Alexandria - the city next door" brand for tourists. In their opinion destination branding is important in the travel and tourism industry.

Marko D. Petrović and others researched factors for sustainable urban tourism: environmental, economic, social, and cultural indicators [9].

They also explored tourism development in industrial small-sized cities, moreover in small towns. Highlighted sustainability through community engagement and urban planning integration in their study. They defined key factors for urban tourism sustainability. According to this, the importance of community engagement and inclusive development was emphasized.

Davood Ghorbanzadeh says that the city brand is influenced by the attractiveness, identification, and experiences of tourists. In this sense, it is highly important to determine the level of satisfaction of tourists and study the business climate [10].

### **Methods**

During the research work, a review of the works of foreign scientists and researchers written on the topic was conducted. Data analysis methods, graphical analysis, comparison and generalization methods were also used.

Based on official data, the tourist potential of small towns of the Turkestan region was described, and factors hindering the development of tourism in small cities were identified. The information base of the study was the task of developing small towns, as well as statistics and data from the Turkestan Tourism Department, as outlined in the thematic session "Big Trip to Small Towns," which took place in Moscow as part of the international tourism forum and exhibition "Leisure."

### **Results and discussion**

The ruins of fortress citadel and fortifications, namely Agallah and Ran, along the secondary caravan route can be seen in the foothills of Karatal, west of the city of Suzak. The remnants of the Ak-Sumbe fortress are positioned at the bifurcation of the caravan path. The vestiges of the Iskere fortress are found on the elevated terrace of the left bank of the Syrdarya River. At its curvature, one can find the ruins of Bayrakum alongside the settlement of Syutken. These significant historical sites are located to the west of the city of Shymkent.

Therefore, the historical and cultural landscape of the Turkestan region suggests the existence of sites that hold considerable significance for the tourism sector. Overall, the Turkestan historical and cultural "oasis" may be characterized as a "Swiss table" for enthusiasts within the tourism industry [11].

Small towns of Turkestan region are rich in cultural and cognitive objects. This tourist potential can be used to form sustainable tourism in the region as a whole (Table 1).

**Table 1 – The touristic potential of the small towns of the Turkestan region**

No.	Small town	Tourist objects
1	Kentau	Ukash ata Well, Zhylagan ata Spring
2	Arys	Mausoleum of Arystan baba, Otyrar settlement, Sopykhan Gate, Ancient city Karakonshek, Sanatorium of Arys
3	Shardara	The reservoir of Shardara, Syrdariya River, The Mausoleum of Uzyn ata
4	Saryagash	The complex of Sanatoriums - Saryagash, Adam and Eve Rocks

*Note: Compiled by the authors based on [12].*

As can be seen from the table above, the cities of Shardara, Arys, Kentau and Saryagash are among the small towns of the Turkestan region with the greatest tourist potential. Each small town is rich in natural landscapes, cultural attractions, and medical complexes that are attractive to tourists [12].

The development of health resort zones is of great importance in the formation of sustainable tourism in small towns of Turkestan region. The table below provides information on the potential of tourist-resort zones in the region (Table 2).

**Table 2 – Information on resort areas and accommodation in small towns of Turkestan Region according to January-September 2024**

	<b>Saryagash Resort area</b>	<b>Turkistan Tourist area</b>
<b>1.</b>	<b>Number of accommodations in resort areas,</b>	
	18	68
<b>2.</b>	<b>Volume of services provided by accommodation facilities in resort areas, thousand tenge</b>	
	352 216,0	2 321 138
<b>3.</b>	<b>Number of visitors served by accommodation facilities in resort areas, thousand people</b>	
	22 515	92 842
<i>Note: Compiled by the authors based on [13].</i>		

As can be seen from the table above, the Turkestan region presents the Turkestan tourist recreation zone, which is the main recreation center, and the complex of Saryagash sanatoriums for the period from January to September 2024, the volume of services provided, the total number of accommodations and treatment and recreation centers, as well as the number of tourists served by sanatoriums. From the statistical data it follows that the number of accommodation places in the recreation areas in Saryagash medical and health centers was 18, in the Tourist Zone of Turkestan-68. And the volume of services rendered in tourist zones in Saryagash resort zone amounted to 352,216 tenge, respectively, in Turkestan tourist zone gross revenue amounted to 2,321,138. In addition, the number of visitors served amounted to 22,515 and 92,842 [13].

Besides, the city of Arys, located in Turkestan region, belongs to the production and transportation center of Kazakhstan (Picture 1)].



Figure 1 - Small towns that are industrial and transport centers of Kazakhstan [14]

According to Picture 1, Back in 1902-1915, residential and industrial buildings were built in the small town of Arys as part of a typical project of a railroad station. At present, Arys-1 and Arys-2 railroad stations are located in the city. In addition, Arys is a city that provides economic stability for the Turkestan region as a whole, as many industries in the city are leaders in exporting consumer goods and household products to other regions. This is a huge opportunity for the development of industrial tourism [14].

The Arys-Turkestan main canal runs through the territory of Turkestan province. The canal was built in 1961. There is a possibility of irrigation of agricultural lands through the main canal, which originates in the small town of Arys, which contributes to the improvement of the economic situation of the region.

The main development plan of Turkestan region envisages the development of the region through small towns. And development of types of economy in small towns helps to develop such important branches of economy as tourism.

And the development of tourism is carried out through the creation of cultural and cognitive objects that are attractive to tourists (Picture 2) [15]:

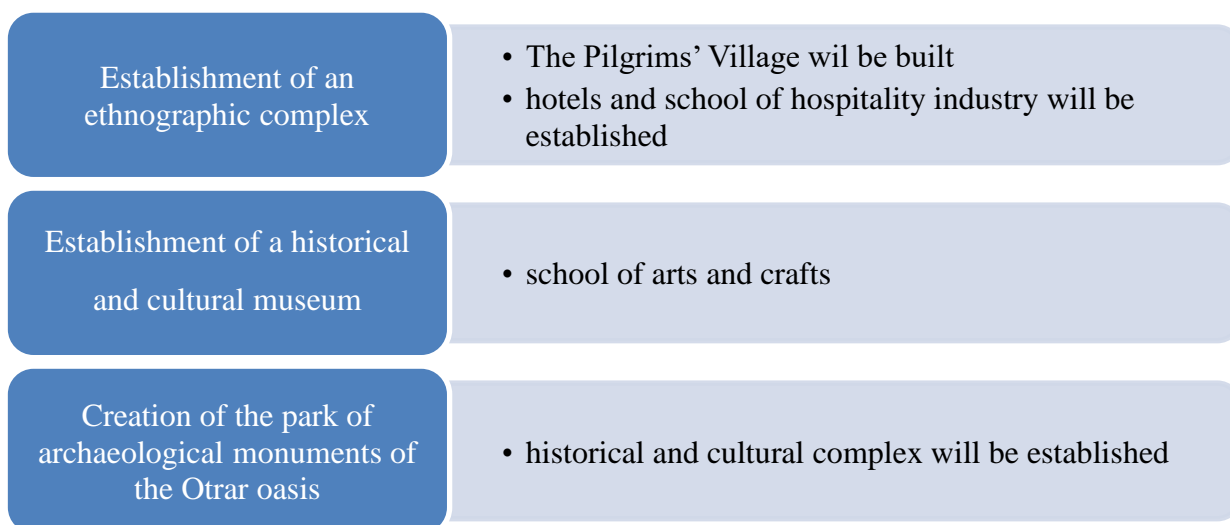


Figure 2 – Priority directions of tourism development

According to the above analysis, the production and tourism potential of small towns in Turkestan region can be effectively used for the implementation of the overall economic development of the region, including tourism:

Decentralization of small towns: for the formation of a tourist brand in small towns of Turkestan region, the improvement of tourist facilities in large cities and decentralization of activities for the effective use of tourism potential in small towns are of great importance. In this way, it is possible to reduce the number of harmful impacts caused by mass tourism on large urban areas, to increase the economic efficiency of all small towns in the region. For example, the infrastructural potential of the small town of Arys, where two railway stations are located, can be used deeply in the process of promotion and formation of domestic tourism. And in the town of Saryagash, the real centre of sanatoriums, there are great opportunities for the formation of the brand of the sanatorium in the direction of medical tourism.

Exploiting the potential of cultural heritage as a means of sustainable tourism: research has shown that small towns in the Turkestan region have particularly attractive cultural and cognitive objects. These tourist objects are reflected in architectural monuments, local master classes and revival of traditions and customs. Realisation of presentation of spiritual and cultural tourist objects to tourists coming from abroad will increase the interest of tourists of any type. In particular, it is necessary to organise popularisation of such sacred places as the Ukash ata Well, Zhylagan ata Spring.

Formation of sustainable tourism on the basis of local communities. On the way of sustainable tourism development, it is possible to hold events of special national and traditional direction with the participation of local residents of the region. On the eve of Nauryz holiday, which is annually celebrated as a common holiday for the peoples of Central Asia, the need for an annual tradition of ethnographic events, such as Gastro Fest, held in the regional centre, in other centres of small towns can be noted. This will help popularise the national brand of the Kazakh people among domestic and international tourists, as well as create conditions for the formation of economic forms that promote tourism development among the local population of small towns.

Ensuring sustainable tourism through Ecotourism and environmental protection. In Turkestan region due to the simultaneous desert zones and mountainous zones it is possible to form ecotourism in small towns of the region. This helps to prevent environmental degradation while preserving biodiversity and responsible tourism practices.

The infrastructure of local entrepreneurship and tourism. The development of small businesses in small towns also affects the sustainability of tourism to a certain extent. For example, canteens, cafes and restaurants opened to promote local cuisine, as well as souvenir shops, camping shelters along the roads, etc. the development of these types of small businesses contributes to the economic development of small towns and the region as a whole. By improving the tourism infrastructure in small businesses, it is possible to create sustainable tourism by reducing some of the negative environmental impacts caused by the tourist flow on a local scale.

The formation of a policy focused on sustainable tourism. It is important to have strategic plans and a clearly defined mission aimed at developing tourism in small towns, including in the regions. At the same time, consideration of local initiatives for sustainable tourism and investments in local small and medium-sized businesses and infrastructure is of great importance.

### **Conclusion**

The small towns located within the Turkestan region possess considerable potential to function as agents for sustainable tourism advancement. With their extensive cultural heritage, historical



importance, and distinctive natural environments, these municipalities represent hidden treasures that possess the capacity to entice tourists in pursuit of authentic experiences. By incorporating sustainable methodologies, such as the preservation of cultural monuments, the promotion of environmentally responsible tourism, and the involvement of local communities, the region can achieve a harmonious balance between economic development and environmental conservation.

The allocation of resources towards infrastructure enhancement, marketing strategies, and capacity-building initiatives for local inhabitants will empower these small municipalities to evolve into dynamic tourism centers. Moreover, the cultivation of collaborative relationships among local governance, commercial enterprises, and international organizations can facilitate a unified strategy for sustainable development of tourism. Through such endeavors, the Turkestan region can manifest its distinctive identity while simultaneously contributing to the holistic socio-economic advancement of the country.

In summary, the small towns within the Turkestan region should be perceived not solely as destinations but also as pivotal agents of sustainable development. By harnessing their intrinsic advantages and embracing a progressive mindset, these towns can establish themselves as significant contributors within the global tourism framework, ensuring enduring advantages for both the region and its populace.

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***ТҮРКІСТАН ОБЛЫСЫНЫҢ ШАҒЫН ҚАЛАЛАРЫ: ӨҢІРДЕГІ ТУРИЗМНІҢ ТҰРАҚТЫ ДАМУ ФАКТОРЫ РЕТІНДЕ***

*Аңдатпа. Аталмыш шолу мақаласында Қазақстанның Түркістан өңірінің шағын қалаларының тұрақты туризм тәжірибесін дамытудың катализаторы ретіндегі маңызы зерттеледі. Орталық Азияның бай тарихи және мәдени мұрасының қиылысында орналасқан Түркістан өңірі жергілікті экономиканың дамуына ықпал ететін, мәдени бірегейлікті сақтайтын және қоршаған ортаның сақталуын қамтамасыз ететін туризм үшін ерекше перспективалар ашады. Шағын қалалардың туризмді дамытуға қосқан үлесіне назар аударып, мақала бұл қауымдастықтардың туризмнің тұрақты шеңберін әзірлеу үшін өздерінің тарихи маңыздылығын, табиғи ландшафттарын және байырғы дәстүрлерін қалай пайдалана алатынын мұқият зерттейді. Мақалада осы қалалардың туризмді дамытудағы көптеген қиындықтары мен мүмкіндіктері, соның ішінде инфрақұрылымды дамыту, жергілікті тұрғындарды тарту және мәдени мұраны сақтау қажеттілігі қарастырылады. Теориялық зерттеу Түркістан өңірінің шағын қалаларының тұрақты туризм орталығы ретінде қызмет ету әлеуеті бар екенін көрсетті. Бұл тұрақты экономикалық өміршеңдік пен мәдени мұраны сақтауға ықпал ететін тұрғындар үшін де,*

кең географиялық аймақ үшін де артықшылықтар береді. Нәтижелер осы тарихи маңызды аймақтағы шағын қалалар үшін тұрақты туризм парадигмасының негізгі элементтері ретінде экотуризмді, мұраны сақтауды және жергілікті кәсіпкерлік қызметті қамтитын кешенді стратегиялардың маңыздылығын көрсетеді.

**Кілт сөздер:** шағын қалалар, Түркістан өңірі, тұрақты туризм, экономикалық даму, мәдени ерекшелік.

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### **МАЛЫЕ ГОРОДА ТУРКЕСТАНСКОЙ ОБЛАСТИ: КАК ФАКТОР УСТОЙЧИВОГО РАЗВИТИЯ ТУРИЗМА В РЕГИОНЕ**

**Аннотация.** В данной обзорной статье исследуется значение малых городов Туркестанского региона Казахстана как катализаторов развития практики устойчивого туризма. Туркестанский регион, расположенный на пересечении богатого исторического и культурного наследия Центральной Азии, открывает особые перспективы для туризма, который может способствовать развитию местной экономики, сохранять культурную самобытность и обеспечивать сохранение окружающей среды. Сосредоточив внимание на вкладе малых городов в развитие туризма, статья тщательно исследует, как эти сообщества могут использовать свое историческое значение, природные ландшафты и традиции коренных народов для разработки устойчивых рамок туризма. В статье рассматриваются многочисленные проблемы и возможности, с которыми сталкиваются эти города при развитии туризма, включая необходимость развития инфраструктуры, вовлечения местных жителей и сохранения культурного наследия. Теоретическое исследование показало, что малые города Туркестанского региона обладают потенциалом для функционирования в качестве центров устойчивого туризма. Это дает преимущества как для жителей, так и для более широкой географической зоны, способствуя устойчивой экономической жизнеспособности и сохранению культурного наследия. Полученные результаты подчеркивают важность комплексных стратегий, включающих экотуризм, сохранение наследия и местную предпринимательскую деятельность, как основополагающих элементов парадигмы устойчивого туризма для малых городов в этом исторически значимом регионе.

**Ключевые слова:** малые города, Туркестанский регион, устойчивый туризм, экономическое развитие, культурная самобытность.