

POLICY BRIEF

on Diversifying Intra-Regional Tourism





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Executive Summary

The Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) region, encompassing diverse landscapes, cultures, and histories, holds significant potential for intra-regional tourism diversification. By leveraging existing mechanisms such as the ECO Tourism Capitals, the ECO Tour Operators' Network, ECO Confobition on Health Tourism, and the Silk Road Food Festival ECO Member States are able collaboratively promote lesser-known destinations and niche tourism segments. This policy brief outlines a strategic framework to identify and capitalize on these opportunities, fostering sustainable economic growth and regional integration.

Background

Tourism within the ECO region has traditionally focused on prominent cultural and historical landmarks. However, the region possesses a rich and diverse array of underexplored tourism assets—including health and wellness retreats, adventure tourism, ecotourism, and other niche segments—that remain largely untapped. Recognizing this untapped potential, the ECO Regional Planning Council welcomed the establishment of an Ad-hoc Specialized Working Group among Member States to prepare a comprehensive framework for exploring and identifying opportunities to diversify intra-regional tourism.

The objective is to broaden the region's tourism offerings through enhanced collaboration, the promotion of lesser-known destinations, and the identification of both existing and potential tourism resources and facilities across various segments. Accordingly, this Policy Brief serves as an up-to-date reference document to guide Member States in the development of coordinated strategies aimed at expanding and diversifying the ECO region's intra-regional tourism landscape.

Recent initiatives, such as the 3rd ECO Confobition on Health Tourism held in Hamedan in June 2025, have showcased the region's capabilities and the benefits of collaborative promotion. Existing and potential tourism resources across the ECO member states in niche segments like health, adventure, religious, sports, business, gastronomy tourism, ecotourism and agrotourism are as follows:

Health and Wellness Tourism

Health tourism is a burgeoning sector within the ECO region, with several member states offering advanced medical facilities and wellness retreats:

Iran is recognized for its medical expertise and affordable healthcare services, Iran has hosted events like the 3rd ECO Confobition on Health Tourism in Hamedan, June 2025, highlighting its capabilities in this sector. Türkiye offers a combination of modern medical facilities and traditional wellness centers, attracting patients for treatments ranging from cosmetic surgery to thermal therapies. Azerbaijan is also known for its natural therapeutic resources, including mineral springs and mud baths, particularly in regions like Naftalan.



Kazakhstan can offer an extensive variety of resorts surrounded by natural attractions, where one can spend a relaxing holiday and improve one's health.

Mountain and Winter Tourism

The diverse topography of the ECO region provides ample opportunities for adventure enthusiasts:

Among the ECO Member States Kyrgyz Republic is home to the Tien Shan mountains, offering trekking, mountaineering, and horseback riding experiences. Tajikistan features the Pamir Mountains, attracting climbers and hikers seeking challenging terrains. Pakistan hosts some of the world's highest peaks, including K2, making it a prime destination for mountaineering and trekking. Mountain tourism in Kazakhstan is also actively developing especially in Trans-Ili Alatau range located at the foothills of Almaty, Tien Shan, Dzungairan Alatau and Altai Mountain regions which gained popularity. Winter tourism also gained momentum in the Member States along with new investments for accommodation and ski facilities as well as hosting important winter sports tournaments.

Religious (Ziyarat) Tourism

The ECO region is rich in religious heritage sites, attracting pilgrims and cultural tourists alike: Cities like Mashhad and Qom in Iran are significant pilgrimage sites for Shia Muslims. In addition, Pakistan houses important Islamic sites, including the Badshahi Mosque in Lahore and the Faisal Mosque in Islamabad. Türkiye offers a blend of Islamic and Christian heritage sites, such as the Hagia Sophia and the Blue Mosque in Istanbul. In Kazakhstan, the Mausoleum of Khoja Ahmet Yassawi is a prominent pilgrimage tourism destination whereas sacred sites like Aisha Bibi and Karakhan Mausoleums become more significant.

Ecotourism

Ecotourism is gaining momentum in the ECO region, focusing on sustainable practices and community involvement:

In Türkiye the Küre Mountains National Park, among other national parks, is renowned for its biodiversity and has implemented successful ecotourism projects involving local communities. Uzbekistan has some efforts are being made to promote ecotourism in regions like the Nuratau-Kyzylkum Biosphere Reserve, emphasizing conservation and local culture. In Kazakhstan natural reserve areas such as the Altyn-Emel National Park offer unique desert landscapes and diverse wildlife, attracting nature enthusiasts. Within ECO framework, Expert Group on Ecotourism convened four times so far, a compendium for best practices of ecotourism has been prepared and will be launched in 2026.

Business and MICE Tourism (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, Exhibitions)

Among the Member States, metropolitan cities in Türkiye such as Istanbul, Antalya, and Ankara are well-established MICE hubs with international convention centers (e.g., Istanbul Congress Center, Antalya Expo Center) having experience of hosting global events like EXPO, G20 summits, and medical conferences. Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan is a growing MICE



destination with the Baku Congress Center and world-class hotels. Baku hosts Formula 1 Grand Prix and international energy forums as well as the latest COP29 conference. Kazakhstan has recently achieved great strides for making Astana and Almaty with growing MICE infrastructure; EXPO 2017 showcased capability. In Iran Tehran and Mashhad regularly host business and trade events; venues include Milad Tower Conference Hall.

Gastronomy (Culinary) Tourism

Despite the fact that whole ECO region has unique tastes and delicacies with exceptional hospitality, to name a few Uzbekistan is renowned for Plov, Shashlik, and traditional bread culture and tour operators integrate culinary tours into Silk Road packages. Iran also has regional specialties like Fesenjan, Kebab, and Herbal distillates and the country hosts local food festivals and cooking experiences (e.g., in Shiraz, Isfahan and Rasht). Türkiye has a very rich variety across Aegean, Anatolian, and Ottoman cuisines; culinary trails in Gaziantep (UNESCO Creative City of Gastronomy along with Hatay and Afyonkarahisar for this title). Pakistan additionally offers diverse culinary traditions: Punjabi, Sindhi, and Pashtun cuisines attract food tourism, for instance Lahore is a gastronomic hotspot for the country.

ECO's current Silk Road Food Festival promotes regional flavors under ECO framework and this festival could be extended to the other cities in the region inviting more globally recognized food vloggers.

Sports Tourism

As a promising area of tourism for the ECO region, sport tourism has a great potential to prosper as all Member States has experience of hosting many sports-related events likes big tournaments. Kyrgyz Republic hosts World Nomad Games; popular for horseback riding, yurt-based camps, and alpine sports. Pakistan has popular events for adventure sports (e.g., trekking, rock climbing) in Skardu, Hunza, and Fairy Meadows and cricket and polo (e.g., Shandur Polo Festival) attract regional spectators.

Iran has ski resorts like Dizin and Tochal near Tehran offer winter sports and the country is popular for wrestling and traditional martial arts, like their recent success at 2025 World Wrestling Championship. In Kazakhstan, Almaty is known for winter sports; hosted 2011 Asian Winter Games. In the country golf and hiking also growing in popularity and in 2025-2026 season first time one football club from Kazakhstan is included in the Champions League. FIFA has recently taken a decision on the U20 Football World Cup to be hosted by Azerbaijan and Uzbekistan.

Agrotourism

Due to the geographic location of the region, all ECO countries have suitable climate and soil structure for cropping food and drink varieties. The region also hosted the important destinations on the historical spice road as well. For example, mountain villages in Pamir and Fann Mountains of Tajikistan offer immersive agro-rural tourism experiences (e.g., fruit harvesting, local crafts). In Azerbaijan regions like Gakh and Sheki promote farm stays and



vineyard tours. In Iran, Gilan, Mazandaran, and Kurdistan offer rice fields, tea plantations, and eco-agro lodges and they are integrated with ecotourism and handicrafts. Türkiye is well-developed in Aegean and Black Sea regions (e.g., olive oil tours, vineyard stays, hazelnut farms). Those are supported by government-backed rural tourism programs as well.

Enhancing Collaborative Platforms

Existing ECO tourism cooperation mechanisms need to be strengthened and expanded to facilitate knowledge sharing and joint marketing efforts. Establishing a dedicated online platform within the ECO Tourism Website to serve as a central hub for ECO Member States to share tourism data, best practices, investment opportunities, and joint promotional campaigns. This hub could also host virtual B2B meetings, webinars, and training programs. The ECO has already an expert group for ecotourism, new thematic expert groups for health and wellness tourism, gastronomy tourism, mountain and winter tourism could be formed expanding partnerships with private sector. ECO Silk Road Food Festival, previously only hosted by Iran could be expanded to other Member States and its programme could be enriched.

Promotion of Sustainable Practices

Growth of tourism services in various areas and locations require protection of environment and cultural values as well as social sustainability. Working Group on Tourism Standardization could enlarge its standardization efforts to the niche areas starting from the gastronomy tourism for further promotion ECO Sustainable Tourism branding for compliant businesses and destinations. ECO Member States also need to ensure niche tourism projects empower and include local communities, particularly in remote or culturally sensitive areas. Under the framework of ECO, training and micro-grants could be provided to local entrepreneurs, artisans, and guides to promote inclusive economic benefits.

Conclusion

Enhancing collaboration platforms will promote synergies, reduce duplication, and help ECO Member States capitalize on the region's rich and diverse tourism assets. Efforts towards sustainable tourism would help the ECO region transition toward high-quality, diversified, and responsible tourism in line with both regional cooperation goals defined in the Strategic Goals of Economic Cooperation for 2035 and national tourism strategies.