

TRANSFORMING THE DARK TOURISM POTENTIAL IN AZERBAIJAN INTO SUSTAINABLE TOURISM REVENUE

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Abstract: This study examines how Azerbaijan’s dark tourism potential can be transformed into sustainable tourism revenue by identifying key strategic and institutional factors. Dark tourism, encompassing sites related to genocide, armed conflicts, and historical tragedies, represents a growing niche with significant cultural, educational, and economic implications. The research employs a comparative-analogy approach combined with SWOT analysis to evaluate Azerbaijan’s major destinations—including the Guba and Khojaly Genocide Memorial Complexes, Shusha Castle, Martyrs’ Alley, Victory Museum, Agdam Ruins, Baku Metro, and Nargin Island—against internationally recognized sites such as Auschwitz-Birkenau, Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, and the 9/11 Memorial. The findings reveal that although Azerbaijan possesses substantial historical assets and strong educational value, the sector is constrained by limited international recognition, underdeveloped infrastructure, and insufficient digital integration. However, significant opportunities exist through the implementation of tiered pricing strategies, guided tours, commemorative and educational programs, digital promotion, and improved accessibility. Strengthening cooperation among tourism authorities, cultural institutions, local communities, and international organizations could further improve the visibility and management of these destinations. Moreover, integrating dark tourism sites into national and regional tourism routes may diversify Azerbaijan’s tourism portfolio and encourage longer visitor stays. The study contributes to the literature by offering an integrated strategic framework linking global benchmarking with sustainable tourism development. Policy implications suggest that effective management, stakeholder coordination, and international promotion can enhance visitor engagement, increase tourism revenue, strengthen destination competitiveness, and support the long-term preservation of cultural and historical heritage.

Keywords: Azerbaijan, dark tourism, Sustainable tourism, comparative-analogy approach, SWOT analysis

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INTRODUCTION

Emerging as a branch of cultural tourism, dark tourism has gained prominence since the 1990s and has been the subject of numerous academic studies. In the existing literature, this type of tourism is often referred to as “mourning tourism” or “grief tourism.” Its growing attention in recent years is attributed to researchers evaluating it as a unidirectional experience that not only provides psychological and physiological benefits to participants but also offers an opportunity for enjoyable leisure (Yıldız et al., 2015). Dark tourism is a form of tourism centered on death, violence, torture, oppression, and human suffering, involving visits to sites where such experiences have occurred. Although not a recent phenomenon, its practices date back centuries to Roman gladiator games, public executions, and Victorian-era death rituals (Stone & Sharpley, 2008). The term, first introduced by Lennon and Foley, was used to describe a particular interest in death, macabre elements, and paranormal phenomena. As pioneering scholars in the field, they emphasized that dark tourism is linked to activities such as attending executions or visiting morgues, encompassing themes of violence, crime, and death (Lennon & Foley, 2000).

Similarly, Seaton explored its various dimensions through concepts such as “thanatourism,” “morbid tourism,” and “blackspots,” (Seaton, 1996) while Dalton defines dark tourism sites as those associated with genocide, mass killings, acts of terror, or human rights violations (Dalton, 2014). Historically, assassinations, wars, explosions, and terrorist acts have played a decisive role in shaping dark tourism (Alaeddinoğlu & Aliğaoglu, 2007). And conclusion, dark tourism represents

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a form of tourism that reflects societal memory and curiosity, allowing visitors to engage with sites marked by human suffering and to experience the macabre, dramatic, and sometimes paranormal aspects of history. Dark tourism allows visitors to explore historical sites associated with death, tragedy, and suffering, thereby understanding the historical context of these events, commemorating the victims, and considering the ethical implications for local communities (Kama & Akoğlan Kozak, 2016). Tourists are drawn to such sites both to experience and to observe past tragic events.

Moreover, visitors have the opportunity to explore their own psychological and emotional boundaries when confronted with death and tragedy (Stone & Sharpley, 2008). Dark tourism can be categorized into two main types: naturally caused dark tourism and human-caused dark tourism (Yıldız et al., 2015). Naturally caused dark tourism refers to events that occur without human intervention and is associated with tourism linked to death and suffering. Examples include the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 76 BCE, which buried Pompeii under lava and ash (Seaton, 1999), the visits to New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina in 2005 (Dunkley et al., 2007), and the 2011 Tohoku earthquake and subsequent tsunami in Japan (Bayra, 2021). Other examples include forest fires, floods, hurricanes, avalanches, and landslides (Sönmez et al., 1999). Human-caused dark tourism involves visiting sites associated with death, suffering, violence, and fear caused deliberately or accidentally by humans, often with the aim of understanding or witnessing historical traumas and dramatic events (Dunkley et al., 2007). Depending on the nature of the sites and events, this type of dark tourism can be further subdivided into genocide tourism, dark heritage tourism, bereavement tourism, war tourism, disaster tourism, horror tourism, extreme tourism, terror tourism, slum tourism, and thanatourism (Yıldız et al., 2015). Dark tourism not only satisfies visitors' curiosity and desire for knowledge but also contributes to the preservation of collective memory, understanding of historical events, and the formation of local identity. While experiencing sites associated with death and tragedy, visitors gain the opportunity to comprehend events in their historical context and to commemorate the victims. In this regard, dark tourism emerges as a socially, culturally, and ethically significant form of tourism for both visitors and local communities (Kama & Akoğlan Kozak, 2016).

In 2023, the global dark tourism market was estimated at USD 31.89 billion, representing approximately 0.35% of total global tourism revenue, which is assumed to be around USD 9 trillion. Considering the projected compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 2.9%, this share is expected to increase to 0.43% by 2030. These figures indicate that, although dark tourism currently accounts for a relatively small portion of the overall tourism market, it is steadily growing and is likely to attract increasing attention in the coming years (Grand View Research, 2025). Dark tourism encompasses subcategories such as genocide tourism, war and oppression tourism, and terrorism tourism, providing visitors with opportunities to engage directly with sites marked by historical trauma and human suffering. These subcategories serve not only commemorative and educational purposes but also represent significant tourism potential through museums, memorials, battlefields, and other historical sites for both domestic and international visitors. Furthermore, the transformation of sites of past atrocities into structured tourism experiences enhances economic sustainability while promoting cultural awareness, and peace-oriented narratives, thereby supporting long-term economic resilience (Stone & Sharpley, 2008).

Genocide tourism, a specialized form of dark tourism, involves visiting and commemorating sites where mass killings and genocides historically occurred (Stone & Sharpley, 2008). Such visits provide individuals with the opportunity to engage directly with places marked by profound human suffering, thereby fostering a deeper understanding of the historical and emotional weight of these events (Totten & Parsons, 2008). Given that genocides throughout history have resulted in the loss of millions of lives and left lasting social, cultural, and political trauma, the continued remembrance of these tragedies holds critical significance (Power, 2002). In recognition of the devastating consequences of genocide, the modern international community—particularly through the efforts of the United Nations—has developed legal and institutional frameworks aimed at preventing future atrocities and ensuring accountability for perpetrators (United Nations, 2008). For instance, memorials and museums dedicated to the 1994 Tutsi genocide in Rwanda attract approximately 193,000 visitors annually (Becker, 2019), while the Srebrenica Memorial Center in Bosnia and Herzegovina receives around 86,000 visitors each year (Hoare, 2021). Similarly, the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum in Poland hosted 1.83 million visitors in 2024, strengthening the global remembrance of the Holocaust (Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum, 2025).

In Southeast Asia, the Choeung Ek Genocide Center in Cambodia, where millions were killed under the Khmer Rouge regime between 1975 and 1979, serves both to preserve historical memory and to attract approximately 250,000 visitors annually; the site's management by a Japan-based company and an entrance fee of around USD 5 for international visitors also highlight the economic dimension of genocide-related heritage tourism (Bickford, 2009). In Africa, between 1904 and 1907, the Herero and Nama peoples in German South-West Africa (Namibia) were targeted by colonial forces (Grimshaw, 2014). In Eastern Europe, the Holodomor genocide of 1932–1933, in which millions of Ukrainians—approximately 13–15% of the population—were deliberately starved as a result of the USSR's collectivization policies and political repression, is documented at the National Museum of the Holodomor-Genocide in Kyiv (Serhiychuk, 2021). Finally, rising visitor numbers at Kazakhstan's Karlag and Alzhir museums—from 44,054 in 2016 to 55,914 in 2017—demonstrate increasing public engagement with the memory of Soviet-era repression (Cameron, 2016).

Dark tourism, as a specialized branch, encompasses genocide tourism, which in the context of Azerbaijan offers a significant opportunity for commemorating the historical genocides suffered by the Azerbaijani people, strengthening their international recognition, and transforming the tourism potential of these tragedies into sustainable economic benefits (Baghirov et al., 2025a). The “31 March–Azerbaijanis Genocide,” which occurred in 1918, took place in several regions of Azerbaijan, particularly in Shamakhi, Ganja, Baku, and the Karabakh region, and is commemorated at the Guba Genocide Memorial Complex (Guliyeva, 2022), honoring the victims and serving as a site for remembrance and education. In contrast, the “Khojaly Genocide” of 26 February 1992, perpetrated by Armenian forces, occurred in the city of Khojaly in the Karabakh region and remains one of the most significant modern genocides globally (Guliyeva, 2022).

Furthermore, guided by Clause 32 of Article 109 of the Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan, on 25 February 2025, the Head of State signed a decree establishing the Khojaly Genocide Memorial Complex in Khojaly to internationally promote awareness of the genocide committed against the Azerbaijani people and to perpetuate the memory of its victims (Azərbaycan Respublikası Prezidentinin Sərəncamı, 2025). Such initiatives reinforce Khojaly's position in collective memory, enhance Azerbaijan's international recognition as a genocide tourism destination, and simultaneously support human rights and peace-oriented international discourses, as evidenced by the cases of Rwanda and Srebrenica (Becker, 2019; Hoare, 2021). This highlights that genocide tourism is not solely an act of commemoration or education but also constitutes a domain of tangible economic and socio-cultural significance.

Genocides have typically been perpetrated systematically by governments, armed forces, or holders of power on political, ethnic, or ideological grounds. Taken collectively, these cases demonstrate that genocide tourism encompasses broader economic, cultural, and socio-political dimensions beyond remembrance and educational purposes.

War and oppression tourism refers to a type of tourism that involves visiting historical battlefields, monuments, museums, and sites associated with oppression in order to understand and experience the historical, cultural, and tragic impacts of conflict (Dunkley et al., 2007). This form of tourism encompasses trips to both historical and active war zones for educational purposes and often involves exposure to potentially dangerous or restricted areas (Weaver, 2000). Following the First and Second World Wars and the Turkish War of Independence, visitors to battlefields often aim to pay tribute to fallen soldiers and to revisit these sites (Atay & Yeşildağ, 2010; Best, 2007). Prominent examples include the Gallipoli Peninsula in Çanakkale and the Anzac cemeteries. In addition, oppression and slavery tourism covers sites that reflect humanity's darker past, including prisons, centers of the slave trade, and locations where systematic violence was inflicted (Dunkley et al., 2007). Notable examples include Alcatraz Prison in San Francisco (Wilson, 2008) and the Cape Coast and Elmina castles in Ghana, which are UNESCO World Heritage Sites (Mowatt & Chancellor, 2011).

In this context, as a subcategory of dark tourism, war and atrocity tourism holds a significant place in Azerbaijan. During the First and Second Nagorno-Karabakh Wars, attacks carried out by Armenians against the Azerbaijani population in the Karabakh region exemplify the devastating impacts of war (Özdaşlı, 2021). The extremely cruel acts of torture and persecution inflicted on Azerbaijani soldiers and civilians by Armenians have been systematically documented, and these events can be examined within the framework of war and atrocity tourism. In particular, prisons where captives were held under severe conditions, often resulting in death, such as the Shusha Prison in the city of Shusha, constitute tangible examples of this form of tourism (Azertac, 2023). Moreover, in post-war Azerbaijan, sites where individuals who sacrificed their lives for the country's independence and sovereignty are buried, and where they are commemorated as martyrs, such as Martyrs' Lane and January 20 Memorial, are regarded as potential destinations for war and dark tourism (Mahishov, 2025).

The historical roots of war and repression tourism in Azerbaijan can be traced to the atrocities committed by Russian forces against Azerbaijanis, Turks, and other ethnic groups, which now serve as potential destinations for dark tourism (Göktaş, 2024). During World War I, Nargin Island was used as a prisoner camp, where Ottoman and Turkish-Muslim soldiers, as well as individuals from various ethnic groups, were held under harsh conditions (Aslan, 2010). Furthermore, during the Soviet and Stalinist periods, the island was employed as a tool of political repression for detaining prisoners, and some studies have referred to it as the "Island of Death" (Akkor, 2017). Following the 44-day war, the Military Trophy Park showcases military equipment and artifacts captured from the enemy, providing a unique dark tourism experience (Mammadli, 2021), while the Victory Museum presents the achieved victory and heroism through multimedia and exhibitions, offering a thematic dark tourism site (President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, 2024), both locations, situated near the center of Baku, ensure easy accessibility for both domestic and international visitors.

Dark tourism encompasses not only battlefields, genocide sites, and places of oppression, but also historical ruins and abandoned settlements. Such ruins serve as tangible representations of past tragedies and social collapse, providing visitors with opportunities to engage with both historical and cultural memory (Foley & Lennon, 1996). Within this context, significant dark tourism destinations that have transformed into ruins due to war or disaster include Chernobyl, Ukraine, the site of the nuclear disaster on April 26, 1986 (Molokáčová & Molokáč, 2011), Hiroshima, Japan, which suffered massive destruction following the atomic bombing in 1945 (Diker, 2019), and the Agdam Ruins, which were completely abandoned during the 1990s Nagorno-Karabakh War following Armenian occupation. Today, Agdam dramatically reflects the impacts of the conflict and represents a potential dark tourism site (Özdaşlı, 2021).

Terror tourism refers to a form of tourism in which individuals visit locations where terrorist attacks have occurred, with the aim of understanding the historical, socio-political, and emotional impacts of these events. This type of tourism is commonly associated with practices of commemoration, remembrance, the construction of collective memory, as well as media-driven curiosity. Globally, various sites affected by terrorism have gradually transformed into symbolic places of visitation. For example, the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York on September 11, 2001, and the July 7, 2005 attacks in London, known as "7/7," are recognized as significant global destinations within terror tourism (Godrich, 2002). Although the September 11 attacks initially resulted in a 20–50% decline in tourism reservations in the United States and caused an estimated economic loss of at least two billion dollars, the site attracted approximately 3.6 million visitors by 2002 (Alili, 2017). This demonstrates how locations marked by traumatic events may subsequently evolve into touristic spaces of collective memory and reflection.

In the context of Azerbaijan, there are significant events and locations that can be evaluated within the scope of terrorism tourism (Sarkhanov, 2022); among these, the 1994 and 1995 incidents in the Baku Metro stand out as particularly notable. The bombing attack carried out on 19 March 1994 is considered one of the earliest and most significant terrorist acts targeting civilian infrastructure in Azerbaijan, resulting in the deaths of 14 people and injuries to

more than 50 others, thereby highlighting the vulnerability of urban transport systems during periods of geopolitical instability (Gurski, 1994). This was followed by the tragedy of 28 October 1995, which is regarded as one of the deadliest civilian incidents in the country's history and has been recorded by Guinness World Records as one of the deadliest underground train disasters in the world. On that date, approximately 289 people were killed and more than 250 were injured when a train caught fire in a tunnel between two stations in Baku (Guinness World Records, 1995). Likewise, the armed assault on the Azerbaijan State Oil Academy on 30 April 2009 left lasting psychological and social impacts, and the site of the attack has since gained symbolic meaning in collective memory (NTV haber, 2009).

More recently, during the 44-day Second Karabakh War in 2020, the cities of Ganja and Barda were subjected to ballistic missile and cluster munition attacks by Armenia, resulting in substantial civilian casualties and widespread urban destruction (Hajiyeva, 2025). The areas affected by these strikes have increasingly been recognized as spaces where the memory of trauma, war, and civilian suffering is spatially materialized.

Consequently, these sites represent emerging potential destinations for dark tourism, particularly within the sub-categories of terrorism and war-related memory tourism. Dark tourism, encompassing subcategories such as genocide, war and oppression, and terrorism tourism, transforms sites of historical trauma into meaningful educational and commemorative experiences, and particularly in Azerbaijan, the development of such sites into accessible museums, memorials, battlefields, and ruins not only preserves cultural memory but also converts dark tourism into sustainable economic opportunities, enhancing the country's long-term socio-economic resilience.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study employs a comparative-analogy approach alongside a SWOT analysis to evaluate global best practices, visitor engagement, and economic potential of dark tourism, providing a systematic framework for assessing sites in Azerbaijan. In line with recent bibliometric evidence emphasizing the role of authenticity, emotional experience, and integrated supply-demand approaches in dark tourism research, this study also incorporates these dimensions into its analytical framework (Baghirov & Sarkhanov, 2023; Hernández-Garrido et al. 2026).

However, the scarcity of prior research applying these methods specifically to dark tourism highlights a significant gap in the literature, which also limits the broader understanding of sustainable development strategies and site management within this niche tourism sector (Sarkhanov & Baghirov, 2023).

Recent studies emphasize the importance of strategic and comparative-analytical approaches in tourism development research. Alili (2017) employed a comparative-analogy approach to examine the dark tourism potential in Turkey, comparing destinations such as Çanakkale, Anıtkabir, and Sinop Prison with European sites including Pompeii (Italy), Auschwitz Concentration Camp (Poland), and the Terror Museum (Hungary). The study found that European destinations outperform Turkish sites in terms of visitor numbers and international recognition, highlighting the need for greater awareness and investment in Turkey's dark tourism sector (Alili, 2017). Liu & Suk (2022) applied the Delphi and SWOT-AHP methods to analyze sustainable tourism cooperation between Azerbaijan and China.

They proposed SO strategies that link internal strengths with external opportunities to enhance cultural branding, innovative collaboration, and multilateral tourism development (Liu & Suk, 2022). Similarly, Khanday & Ayoub (2025) used SWOT analysis to evaluate the dark tourism potential of the Hall of Fame in Leh (Ladakh), recommending SO strategies to promote sustainable tourism through improved infrastructure, heritage interpretation, and targeted promotional activities. Karpycheva et al. (2022) conducted a comparative analysis of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods for assessing the tourism potential of Krasnoyarsk Krai.

Their study highlighted the strengths and limitations of each approach and emphasized the need for monitoring systems to track infrastructure development, tourist flows, and visitor perceptions (Khanday & Ayoub, 2020). Wibowo et al. (2021) applied SWOT analysis to examine the tourism potential of North Sumatera, emphasizing strategies to enhance marketing, integrate tourism resources, and improve infrastructure while considering domestic income growth and the role of the online travel industry (Wibowo et al., 2021). Wang et al. (2024) analyzed forest wellness tourism in Chongqing Tea Mountain and Bamboo Forest using SWOT, AHP, and QSPM methods, identifying offensive strategies focused on marketing and resource protection as the most effective. Collectively, these studies underscore the methodological significance of SWOT and comparative-analogy approaches in tourism planning.

Recent empirical research also highlights the value of Input–Output–based quantitative models in tourism analysis. Hasanli & Salihova (2019) applied Input–Output and equilibrium price models to assess the effects of tourism investments on output, employment, and price levels in Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Kazakhstan (Sarkhanov & Huseynli, 2023). Their findings indicate that tourism generates significant multiplier and employment effects, with cross-country differences driven by sectoral integration and labor productivity, thereby providing an economy-wide empirical perspective that complements strategy-oriented methods such as SWOT analysis (Hasanli & Salihova, 2019).

In addition, studies on rural tourism stress its importance in reducing unemployment and supporting regional economic development. Ismayilov et al. (2020) show that the expansion of rural tourism in Azerbaijan contributes to job creation, income growth in rural areas, and the diversification of tourism revenues, particularly through small-scale entrepreneurship and improved rural infrastructure.

Collectively, these studies underscore the methodological significance of combining qualitative strategic frameworks with quantitative economy-wide models in tourism planning and development research (Ismayilov et al., 2020). However, they also reveal a lack of empirical research specifically addressing the planning and development of dark tourism, indicating a gap in the existing literature.

METHODOLOGY

The primary objective of this study is to transform the economic potential of dark tourism in Azerbaijan into sustainable tourism revenue. The research conducts an analogical comparison between internationally recognized forms of dark tourism (e.g., genocide tourism, war and oppression tourism, terrorism tourism, disaster tourism) and Azerbaijan's historical and contemporary events. This approach enables the identification of tourism sites with high educational, commemorative, and economic potential. Existing memorials, museums, battlefields, and ruins are examined to assess the capacity of dark tourism experiences that can be offered to both domestic and international visitors, thereby providing a foundation for the development of sustainable tourism strategies.

To achieve these objectives, the study employs a comparative-analogy approach by analyzing global dark tourism destinations in terms of visitor numbers and generated revenues. This approach facilitates the evaluation of international best practices and benchmarks in the field of dark tourism. In parallel, a SWOT analysis is conducted to identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of Azerbaijan's dark tourism sector. The SWOT analysis systematically examines internal and external factors affecting the sector and enables the formulation of strategic recommendations aimed at enhancing economic benefits, strengthening infrastructure, ensuring ethical management, and preserving cultural values. This methodology allows for a comprehensive assessment of the economic potential, infrastructure, cultural significance, and sustainable development strategies of existing dark tourism sites in Azerbaijan.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Dark tourism, encompassing genocide tourism, provides Azerbaijan with significant opportunities for commemorating historical tragedies, enhancing international recognition, and generating economic and cultural benefits.

In this study, existing memorials, museums, and battlefields are evaluated in terms of the experiences they can offer to visitors. Global dark tourism destinations are analyzed comparatively and analogically based on visitor numbers and generated revenues. In line with empirical evidence highlighting the bidirectional relationship between tourism investment and economic growth, dark tourism can also serve as a strategic driver of sustainable economic performance (Baghirov & Sarkhanov, 2025b). Furthermore, a SWOT analysis identifies the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of Azerbaijan's dark tourism sector, enabling the development of strategies aimed at increasing economic contributions, strengthening infrastructure, ensuring ethical management, and preserving cultural values. This methodology allows for a comprehensive assessment of the sustainable revenue potential of dark tourism in Azerbaijan.

The Srebrenica-Potočari Memorial and Cemetery, located in Potočari, near the city of Srebrenica, Bosnia and Herzegovina, within the context of dark tourism, contributes both to the preservation of collective memory and the support of the regional economy. In 2025, through over 10,000 commemorative events, more than 200,000 young participants, and 1,500 Community Champions, it attracted approximately 86,000 international visitors, thereby enhancing tourism revenues and supporting sustainable tourism practices (Remembering Srebrenica, 2025).

The Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum operates within the context of dark tourism by providing information about genocide victims and organizing educational conferences. In 2024, admission was free for Cambodian visitors, while international visitors were charged \$5 for adults over 18 and \$3 for those aged 10–18; this approach contributed to the museum's ability to generate resilient and sustainable tourism revenue and attracted approximately 250,000 visitors annually (Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, 2025). Rwanda's four genocide memorials—the Kigali Genocide Memorial (Gisozi), Nyamata Memorial (Bugesera), Murambi Memorial (Nyamagabe), and Bisesero Memorial (Western Province)—were inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2023, a recognition that has enhanced their dark tourism potential and increased international awareness. In 2022, prior to their World Heritage designation, these memorials recorded a total of 101,000 visitors, of whom 54,845 were international and 46,600 were Rwandan. Following their inscription, total visitor numbers surged to over 193,000 in 2024, with international visitors exceeding 120,000 and Rwandan visitors over 73,000. This significant increase demonstrates the potential of leveraging genocide memorials within the context of dark tourism to promote economic sustainability and enhance tourism-generated revenue (IGIHE, 2025).

Monuments established to commemorate the famines and repressive policies of the Soviet era serve to preserve collective memory and raise awareness of historical atrocities. In Kazakhstan, the KarLag Memorial attracted 55,914 visitors in 2017, with adults charged 300 KZT for a visit to Dolinka, while at the ALZHIR Memorial adults pay 200 KZT and students 100 KZT, also reaching a total of 55,914 visitors that year. This pricing structure enables both sites to support educational and commemorative functions within the context of dark tourism, while simultaneously fostering economic and cultural value through sustainable tourism practices (Hohenhaus, 2025). Globally, Holocaust tourism attracts the highest number of visitors among dark tourism segments, with the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum in Poland welcoming 1.83 million visitors in 2024 without charging an entrance fee. This underscores the museum's pivotal role in Holocaust education and commemoration. The substantial visitor numbers reflect the global commitment to remembering the atrocities of the Holocaust, enhancing historical awareness, and fostering reflection on the consequences of hatred and intolerance (Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum, 2025).

Using a comparative-analogy approach, Azerbaijan's Guba Genocide Memorial Complex in Guba city and Khojaly Genocide Memorial Complex in Khojaly city, as presented in Figures 1 and 2, respectively, demonstrate parallels with these international examples. Both sites preserve collective memory and offer educational opportunities.

To enhance their impact and sustainability, it is recommended that Azerbaijan implement tiered entrance fees, organize commemorative and educational events, and develop digital platforms for virtual tours and international promotion. Such measures would increase global visibility and tourism-generated revenue.



Figure 1. Guba Genocide Memorial Complex
(Source: Authors, April 14, 2026)



Figure 2. Khojaly Genocide Memorial Complex
(Source: Authors, April 14, 2026)

The number of visitors to the Gallipoli Peninsula Historical National Park and the Anzac Cemeteries and Memorials was approximately 200,000 in 2002, while recent estimates suggest that the figure has exceeded one million annually, although no precise data are available. Regularly organized visits supported by the Turkish government, along with the establishment of designated visitor routes, have significantly contributed to the development of dark tourism in the region and to the steady increase in visitor numbers over time (Çanakkale Savaşları Gelibolu Tarihi Alan Başkanlığı, 2016). In analogy, Azerbaijan's Martyrs' Alley, presented in Figure 3, the Military Trophies Park, illustrated in Figure 4, and the Victory Museum, shown in Figure 5, are significant dark tourism sites in Baku that can benefit from the implementation of guided tours, commemorative events, and educational programs. These initiatives have the potential to steadily increase visitor numbers, promote historical awareness, and foster sustainable tourism development.



Figure 3. Martyrs' Alley (Source: Authors, April 14, 2026)



Figure 4. Military Trophies Park (Source: Authors, April 14, 2026)



Figure 5. Victory Museum (Source: Authors, April 14, 2026)

The Cape Coast and Elmina Castles in Ghana, both listed as UNESCO World Heritage Sites, attracted 104,529 visitors in 2006, generating a total revenue of GH¢146,641.68. In 2007, these castles collectively generated GH¢210,795.83 in revenue. By 2018, they hosted 139,592 visitors, with this number increasing to 157,668 in 2019. By 2023, the total annual

visitor count had reached approximately 180,000 (Ghana Museums & Monuments Board, 2025). Drawing a comparative analogy, Shusha Castle in the Karabakh region could develop guided tours, entrance fees, and heritage-focused programs to enhance visitor engagement, raise historical awareness, and generate sustainable tourism revenue. Alcatraz Island can be considered a site of dark tourism due to its historical prison background, harsh incarceration conditions, and the stories of its famous inmates, attracting approximately 1.2 million visitors annually (National Park Service, 2024).

Although federal park entry is free, as of 2025, the adult daily tour fee—which includes round-trip ferry access and the cellhouse audio tour—is approximately USD 46.25 (OurSausalito.com, 2025). Similarly, Nargin Island, near Baku in the Caspian Sea, holds historical and military significance. By implementing guided tours, organized visits, and reasonable entrance fees, the site could engage visitors, offer educational insights, and contribute to sustainable tourism.

The Chernobyl Exclusion Zone can be regarded as a dark tourism destination due to its association with the 1986 nuclear disaster, its long-term environmental and social consequences, and the abandoned towns within the zone. Between 2017 and 2021, annual visitor numbers ranged from 36,450 to 124,423 (Statista Research Department, 2024), with approximately 40% of visitors being international tourists (Statista, 2021).

All tours are organized through the administration of the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone. As of 2025, the cost of a one-day tour is approximately UAH 699 for Ukrainian citizens and UAH 1,999 for foreign visitors, which includes guided access and safety measures (UNIAN, 2016). The Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, due to its historical association with the 1945 atomic bombing of Hiroshima, its tragic heritage, and its mission to promote peace and nuclear disarmament, emerged as a significant dark tourism destination in 2024, attracting both domestic and international visitors; the annual number of visitors reached 2,003,718, setting a historical record since the museum's opening in 1955 (MERXWIRE, 2025). As of 2025, the admission fee is set at 200 yen for adults (university students and above), 100 yen for high school students, and free for junior high school students and younger; additional exemptions apply for individuals with disabilities caused by the atomic bombing, school groups, and visitors aged 65 and above (ANA Inspiration of JAPAN, 2019). These sites highlight the educational and reflective functions of dark tourism, reinforced by structured access, safety measures, and tiered admission fees.

In Azerbaijan, Shusha Castle, presented in Figure 6, and the Aghdam Ruins, illustrated in Figure 7, both located in the Karabakh region, can emulate these international examples by offering guided tours, interpretive programs, and appropriate safety protocols, thereby promoting historical awareness and sustainable tourism development.



Figure 6. Shusha Castle (Source: Authors, April 14, 2026)



Figure 7. Aghdam Ruins (Source: Authors, April 14, 2026)

The 9/11 Memorial & Museum in New York is a significant site of dark tourism, established to commemorate the September 11 attacks and to reflect upon their historical and socio-cultural implications. In 2023, the museum hosted approximately 2.2 million visitors, while the Memorial attracted over 11 million individuals from across the world. During the same year, the institution's educational initiatives reached 727,000 students and educators (National 9/11 Memorial & Museum, 2023). By 2024, the total reported revenue amounted to approximately USD 93.3 million, with visitor numbers increasing to 2.4 million for the museum and 11.6 million for the Memorial. Admission fees were set at USD 36 for adults and USD 85 for the combined museum and memorial tour (Edelman & Fahmy, 2025) (9/11 Memorial & Museum, 2023). By analogy, sites in Azerbaijan associated with the Metro terrorist attack in 1994 and the Metro tragedy in 1995 in Baku and the 2020 Barda and Ganja terrorist attacks against civilians carried out by the Armenian armed forces can adopt structured guided tours, educational programs, and moderate entrance fees. Such measures would foster collective memory, engage both domestic and international visitors, and generate sustainable tourism revenue.

SWOT Analysis of Dark Tourism in Azerbaijan in Comparison with Global Destinations

This section evaluates Azerbaijan's dark tourism potential by comparing it with internationally recognized destinations in terms of visitor engagement, revenue generation, and management practices.

The SWOT framework further identifies internal and external factors, enabling the development of strategic recommendations for transforming these sites into sustainable tourism revenue sources.

Strengths:

- **Historical and culturally significant sites:** Similar to globally recognized dark tourism destinations such as Alcatraz Island, Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, and the 9/11 Memorial & Museum, Azerbaijan's Martyrs' Alley, Qənimətlər Park, Victory Museum, Shusha Castle, Nargin Island, and Agdam Ruins attract both domestic and international visitors due to their uniqueness.

- **Preservation of tragic historical memory:** Events such as the 1994 and 1995 Baku Metro, and 2020 Barda/Ganja terror attacks contribute to safeguarding collective memory, paralleling international examples such as the Srebrenica-Potočari Memorial and Rwanda's genocide memorials.

- **High visitor capacity potential:** With proper management, Azerbaijan's sites can accommodate significant visitor numbers, similar to Auschwitz-Birkenau, Alcatraz, and other well-managed international sites.

- **Educational and awareness opportunities:** School programs, guided tours, and commemorative events provide meaningful educational experiences, consistent with practices at international dark tourism destinations.

Weaknesses:

- **Lack of international recognition:** Unlike UNESCO-listed sites such as Rwanda's memorials or Ghana's Cape Coast and Elmina Castles, Azerbaijani dark tourism sites currently have limited global visibility.

- **Infrastructure limitations:** Guided tour systems, logistics, digital access, and virtual experiences remain underdeveloped compared to established international examples.

- **Security and accessibility concerns:** Post-conflict or safety issues may restrict access, similar to challenges faced by certain sites in Chernobyl or other conflict-affected dark tourism areas worldwide.

Opportunities:

- **Tiered entrance fees and combined tour packages:** Revenue and visitor engagement can be increased, as seen in Tuol Sleng, Chernobyl, and Alcatraz.

- **Development of educational and awareness programs:** Specialized programs for international visitors and student groups can emulate successful models like Auschwitz-Birkenau or the 9/11 Memorial & Museum.

- **Digitalization and virtual tour options:** Websites, online ticketing, and interactive virtual experiences can enhance global accessibility, as implemented by Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum and other modern dark tourism destinations.

- **International collaboration and promotion:** Visibility can be improved through UNESCO recognition or other global partnerships.

- **PR and media initiatives:** Within the scope of PR and media strategies, it is recommended to develop digital platforms under the theme of "Dark Tourism in Azerbaijan," implement targeted social media campaigns, establish media collaborations, and use data-driven marketing tools. This approach is expected to enhance destination visibility, expand tourism demand, increase visitor numbers and per capita expenditure, and strengthen sustainable revenue capacity.

CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that dark tourism in Azerbaijan—based on sites associated with genocide, war, terrorism, and other tragic historical events—possesses substantial cultural, educational, and economic potential.

Comparative analysis with internationally recognized destinations such as the Srebrenica-Potočari Memorial, Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, Gallipoli Peninsula, Alcatraz Island, and the 9/11 Memorial & Museum indicates that Azerbaijan holds distinctive assets, including the Guba and Khojaly Genocide Memorial Complexes, Shusha Castle, Martyrs' Alley, Victory Museum, Agdam Ruins, and Nargin Island, which can attract both domestic and international visitors if effectively managed.

However, the findings reveal that this potential has not yet been fully translated into sustainable tourism revenue due to existing structural and managerial limitations. Therefore, dark tourism destinations should be evaluated not only in terms of commemoration and education, but also through their capacity to generate stable and long-term economic returns. Within the framework of revitalization strategies, key priorities include the functional reuse of existing sites, the transformation of historical and cultural assets into structured tourism products, the development of digital platforms and virtual tour applications, the preservation of ethical standards, and the strengthening of collective memory and national identity.

These strategies contribute to the expansion of the tourism value chain and support sustainable revenue generation. From a sustainable revenue perspective, the implementation of tiered entrance fee systems and integrated ticketing mechanisms can ensure regular and predictable income streams. Guided tours, educational programs, and commemorative events further stimulate continuous demand, thereby enhancing the economic value of destinations. Additionally, digitalization and international promotion facilitate access to broader tourist segments, increasing per capita tourism expenditure.

In this context, transportation and accessibility policies play a critical strategic role. In particular, airfare pricing for the Karabakh region should be positioned at more competitive and attractive levels compared to flights to other cities in Azerbaijan. Such pricing strategies can stimulate tourist demand, increase visitor flows, and consequently enhance tourism revenue. Moreover, the development of regular transport connections and integrated tourism routes can improve mobility and strengthen the economic performance of destinations. Furthermore, the development of integrated tour packages, discount mechanisms, and multi-day tourism programs can extend visitor stay duration, increase overall expenditure levels,

and reinforce revenue sustainability. Improvements in infrastructure quality and safety standards will enhance visitor satisfaction, encourage repeat visits, and contribute to long-term economic benefits.

In conclusion, the transformation of dark tourism in Azerbaijan into sustainable tourism revenue depends on an integrated approach combining strategic management, digital transformation, infrastructure development, and effective market positioning. This process will contribute to economic growth through increased visitor numbers, longer stays, higher per capita spending, and diversified tourism products, while simultaneously ensuring a balanced and sustainable relationship between heritage preservation and tourism development.

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Abbreviation: SWOT - Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats; UNESCO - United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization; USD - United States Dollar; CAGR - Compound Annual Growth Rate

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