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Assessment of Rural Tourism Development Potential and Sustainability in the Mountainous Shirvan Economic Region

Bilalov Bahadur Anvar¹, Ganbarov Mahabbat Jabir²

¹ Associate Professor
Azerbaijan University of Tourism and Management; Azerbaijan

² Master's Student;
Azerbaijan University of Tourism and Management; Azerbaijan

Abstract. Rural tourism is increasingly used to diversify local economies, retain value within villages, and connect landscape conservation with living cultural heritage. This article assesses the development potential and sustainability conditions of rural tourism in Azerbaijan's Mountainous Shirvan Economic Region, which comprises Aghsu, Ismayilli, Gobustan and Shamakhi districts. The study applies a qualitative, evidence-based regional assessment using official statistics, current tourism policy materials and recent peer-reviewed literature. The results indicate a strong but spatially differentiated resource base. Ismayilli is especially suited to craft, village and forest-linked experiences; Shamakhi to wine, gastronomy, heritage and astrotourism; Aghsu to agritourism and vineyard-linked products; and Gobustan to architectural heritage, pastoral culture and semi-arid landscape interpretation. The main constraint is not a shortage of attractions but the incomplete conversion of resources into bookable, locally owned and environmentally managed products. A sustainable pathway therefore requires village-level enterprise support, last-mile infrastructure, common service standards, digital visibility, carrying-capacity controls and a monitoring system that measures local income retention as well as visitor numbers.

Keywords: *rural tourism; sustainable tourism; Mountainous Shirvan; community participation; agritourism; destination governance; Azerbaijan.*

1. Introduction

Rural tourism links agriculture, hospitality, cultural production and nature-based recreation. Its value lies not only in accommodation receipts, but also in demand for local food, transport, guiding and crafts. Recent reviews nevertheless show that benefits are not automatic: weakly governed growth can commercialise traditions, pressure village infrastructure and distribute income unevenly [8, 9]. Sustainability therefore depends on local ownership, resident participation, ecological limits and

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institutions.

Mountainous Shirvan includes Aghsu, Ismayilli, Gobustan and Shamakhi districts [1]. Proximity to Baku, varied relief, farming traditions, craft settlements and historical sites support short breaks and multi-day routes, yet the region is not homogeneous. This study asks which place-specific resources can support distinctive products, which constraints prevent them from becoming reliable offers, and which governance measures can protect local welfare and environmental quality as demand grows.

2. Conceptual and Regional Context

2.1. Rural tourism as a sustainability instrument

Contemporary research rejects the assumption that more visitors necessarily produce more rural development. Economic gains may coexist with cultural standardisation, spatial change and social tension [8, 9]. A sound assessment must therefore combine economic viability, social inclusion, environmental responsibility and cultural continuity. Community participation should include influence over product design, visitor rules and the scale of activity, not only employment after decisions are made [11–13]. Carrying capacity should likewise be assessed at the pressured site, trail or service rather than fixed for an entire district [10].

2.2. Regional profile and emerging market evidence

Mountainous Shirvan covers about 6.06 thousand square kilometres and combines lowland, foothill and mountain environments [2]. Its dispersed settlement pattern can distribute small-scale experiences, but it raises the cost of transport, utilities and coordination. The Baku-Shamakhi corridor is a strong access spine; for remote villages, however, dependable last-mile roads, mobile coverage and seasonal access determine market readiness.

Official data recorded 49 hotels and hotel-type establishments in the region in 2024 [2]. This confirms a formal accommodation base but does not capture all family guesthouses, guides, farms and seasonal providers. Regional monitoring should combine hotel statistics [3] with a verified village-enterprise registry and indicators of occupancy, employment and local expenditure retention.

Geographical terminology also requires care. Gobustan District in Mountainous Shirvan is not the same territory as the UNESCO-listed Gobustan Rock Art landscape near Baku. Its own assets include the Diri Baba Mausoleum at Maraza, pastoral culture and semi-arid scenery [19]. Accurate identity is part



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of product credibility.

3. Materials and Methods

The study applies a qualitative desk-based regional assessment using official legal and statistical sources, current destination materials and peer-reviewed research published mainly in 2024–2026 [1–18]. Each district was examined for resource distinctiveness, product feasibility, locally retained income and environmental or cultural risk. The results are diagnostic rather than predictive: they identify priorities for later verification through household surveys, enterprise interviews, seasonal counts and site observation.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. District-level resource and product differentiation

The four districts have complementary rather than competing profiles. A network of place-based clusters linked by common standards is therefore more credible than a uniform regional product. Table 1 identifies the most defensible resource-product combinations.

Table 1

District-level rural tourism resource-product matrix

District	Resource base, viable products and main condition
Ismayilli	Lahij and Basgal craft heritage, Ivanovka's agricultural landscape, forested mountain villages and local cuisine support homestays, craft workshops, walking and cycling, farm visits and small culinary experiences. The key condition is to keep craft production and resident life central, rather than turning villages into uniform retail displays [19].
Shamakhi	Vineyards, wineries, Shirvanshah-era heritage, rural settlements near Pirgulu and the astrophysical observatory support wine and food routes, heritage walks, astrotourism and mountain-based short stays. Product bundling can reduce seasonality, but traffic, water use and waste at weekend peaks require site-level management [5].
Aghsu	Vineyards, orchards, farming landscapes and archaeological-historical resources favour agritourism, harvest experiences and local-food workshops.

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Table continuation 1

District	Resource base, viable products and main condition
Aghsu (continued)	Links to the regional wine route are feasible. The main need is enterprise incubation: safe home-based hospitality, storytelling, booking support and connections between farms and established tour operators [5].
Gobustan	Diri Baba Mausoleum, Maraza's architectural setting, pastoral livelihoods and semi-arid scenery support cultural routes, landscape interpretation, shepherding and food experiences, and small events. Route descriptions must distinguish the district from the Gobustan Rock Art site near Baku; accurate identity is part of product credibility [19].

Ismayilli and Shamakhi have the clearest concentration of recognised experiences, while Aghsu and Gobustan offer different strengths. A multi-day circuit should connect these differences rather than reproduce the same guesthouse-and-sightseeing model in every district.

4.2. Economic inclusion and community ownership

The central economic question is how much visitor expenditure remains in villages. Rural tourism supports development when households can sell accommodation, meals, guiding, farm products, crafts and transport within a coordinated itinerary [13, 18]. Pilot clusters should therefore combine microfinance with hospitality, food safety, pricing, accounting, language, digital and emergency training. Women and young residents must also share decision-making and control over income, not merely supply unpaid or low-paid labour.

4.3. Cultural and environmental sustainability

Cultural sustainability requires living practices to remain meaningful to residents. Craft and food experiences should be designed and priced by practitioners; in Basgal and Lahij, conservation should support active workshops, residential use and traditional skills, not only restored facades [19]. Environmental controls must be equally specific: mountain areas need trail, fire, litter and water management, while vineyards and semi-arid routes need water-

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efficiency and land-use safeguards. Group limits or reservations should follow observed pressure, not be imposed without evidence [10].

Table 2
Sustainability risks, management responses and proposed indicators

Dimension	Priority management response	Indicators for annual review
Economic	Support locally owned bundles and purchasing agreements.	Local share of tourism spending; number and survival of village microenterprises; off-season revenue.
Social	Give residents a formal role in route and event decisions.	Resident satisfaction; participation of women and youth; complaints resolved; tourism jobs by village.
Cultural	Use practitioner-led interpretation and conservation rules.	Active workshops; paid practitioner hours; condition of heritage buildings; resident assessment of authenticity.
Environmental	Monitor water, waste, trail condition and visitor concentration.	Waste per visitor-night; water use; peak counts; trail or site condition; public-transport share.
Governance	Create a shared registry, standards and open monitoring dashboard.	Verified providers; compliance rate; training completion; data coverage; joint products sold.

4.4. Digital visibility, access and seasonality

Digitalisation is useful when it removes practical friction. Online booking and payment, accurate maps, current prices and responsive communication matter more than novel but poorly maintained applications [14, 16, 17]. A shared content system should distribute verified information to existing booking and map services and state road conditions, public transport, mobile coverage and seasonal limitations honestly. Seasonality should be managed through product diversity: wine and harvest calendars, craft and food workshops, heritage visits, astrotourism and weather-

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appropriate landscape routes.

5. An Integrated Development Framework

Rural tourism in Mountainous Shirvan should be planned as a conversion process: local resources become place-based products only when access, skills, finance, digital discovery and destination governance are present. Safeguards for resident voice, carrying capacity, water, waste and authenticity must operate throughout this process (Figure 1). Accommodation construction alone does not create a rural destination.

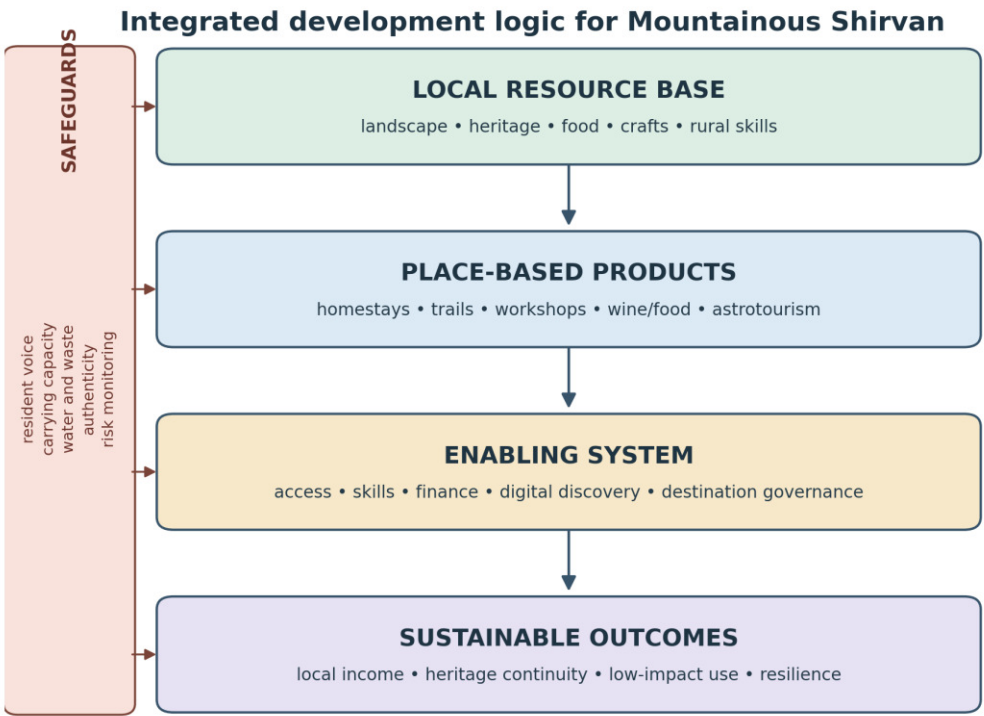


Figure 1
Integrated framework for sustainable rural tourism development in
Mountainous Shirvan (developed by the authors)

Implementation can proceed in three stages. The first year should map providers, select pilot clusters, establish baseline indicators and correct critical access, sanitation and safety gaps. Years two and three should build product bundles, skills, microfinance, quality standards and shared digital content. Later expansion should depend on evidence of local benefit, resident support and acceptable environmental

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pressure. A representative regional council should publish these results annually [6, 7].

6. Conclusion

Mountainous Shirvan has a substantial but differentiated rural tourism resource base. Its most credible products arise from distinct combinations of crafts, wine, agriculture, architecture, gastronomy, mountain environments and pastoral culture. Development should focus on converting these resources into reliable, bookable and locally owned experiences. Success must be evaluated through income retention, resident participation, cultural continuity and environmental condition, not visitor growth alone. Village surveys, enterprise mapping and site-level carrying-capacity studies are the necessary next research stage.

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