

Unveiling the Prospects, Potential and Challenges of Archaeological Tourism in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Tourism is a global activity and the fastest growing sector of the world economy. Pakistan is one of the renowned tourist destinations worldwide. It hosts magnificent historical landmarks, rich heritage sites, unique cultural experiences, and diverse attractions proved its legacy. The country's strategic location has witnessed various ancient civilizations, including the Indus Valley Civilization and the Gandhara Civilization. There are diverse archaeological sites that are over 6,000 in all over the Pakistan including the classified UNESCO six major heritage sites that attracted millions of visitors annually. However, despite, significant prospects the tourism industry is facing numerous challenges in Pakistan including the lack of proper institutional, administrative and physical infrastructure, communications barriers, poor coordination among departments, lack of private investment, inadequate provincial tourism organizations, ineffective marketing, limited technology use, and insufficient workforce development. So, in order to preserve these archaeological sites and for promoting tourism, economic growth, and national identity this research suggested to focused on five main avenues i.e. infrastructure development, sustainable tourism practices, empowerment of local communities engagement, digital marketing promotions and enhance public-private partnerships in tourism particularly archaeological tourism.

Keywords: Tourism, Archaeological Tourism, Prospects, Potential, Challenges, Heritage Sites.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is a global activity that encompasses travel for leisure or businesses, including the industry's efforts to attract, accommodate, and entertain visitors, as well as the operation of tours (Mohsin et al., 2024). Tourism is exclusively defined as "tourism is a social, cultural, and economic phenomenon involving travel to new destinations for personal or professional purposes". (UNWTO, 2024). Tourism plays a crucial role in the global economy, generating substantial revenue and driving economic growth (Bozdar, 2025). Tourism fosters cross-cultural exchange, sharing ideas, ethics, and creativity between cultures. However, poorly planned or managed tourism can harm both cultural heritage and the environment (Smith, 2004). Cultural heritage (archeological) tourism combines tangible and intangible aspects of the past, attracting visitors for various reasons, such as learning, personal growth, curiosity, volunteering, spiritual exploration, socializing, or immersive experiences (Timothy, 2021). Archaeological sites are a key asset for heritage tourism, particularly in countries with rich historical records like Pakistan, Egypt, Italy, and Greece. These sites often serve as the main attraction, drawing visitors and driving the tourism industry (Timothy et al., 2024).

Moreover, tourism is the fastest growing sector of the world economy. The World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) reports that the sector's direct contribution to the global economy was nearly \$10

trillion in 2023, not \$3.3 trillion as previously stated. For 2024, the WTTC projects a record-breaking year with the sector's global economic contribution set to reach \$11.1 trillion. Regarding job support, the WTTC estimates that Travel & Tourism directly and indirectly supported around 357 million jobs globally in 2024, significantly higher than the 194 million figure mentioned earlier. This growth underscores the sector's pivotal role in the global economy and employment landscape (WTTC, 2025). According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), tourism revenue worldwide reached a record \$1.9 trillion in 2024, with approximately 1.4 billion international tourists traveling globally, nearly recovering to pre-pandemic levels. This significant growth highlights tourism's substantial contribution to the global economy (UNWTO, 2024).

Pakistan is also experiencing a surge in tourism overall, with the fastest growth rate in tourist arrivals worldwide, underscoring the importance of integrating tourism into the country's economic development strategy. This growth highlights the potential for tourism to significantly contribute to Pakistan's GDP, create jobs, and stimulate local economies. To capitalize on this trend, Pakistan should prioritize sustainable tourism practices, invest in infrastructure development, and promote eco-friendly initiatives that showcase its rich cultural heritage and breathtaking natural beauty (Hussain and Kakepoto, 2024). Additionally, it needs to implement incentives for sustainable tourism and establish effective regulations for tour operators (TOs) to ensure responsible tourism practices (Ullah et al., 2021). Pakistan ranked 101st out of 119 countries in the World Economic Forum's Travel & Tourism Development Index 2024, scoring 3.41 out of 7. This marks a 20-place improvement from 2019, showcasing the country's growing tourism sector (Bozdar, 2025). In 2016, Pakistan's tourism sector contributed approximately \$7.6 billion, with a projected growth rate of 5.1% in 2017. Looking ahead, the sector is expected to expand at a compound annual growth rate of 5.6%, potentially reaching PKR 1,432.1 billion of GDP by 2027 (Arshad et al., 2018). Thus, the main aim of this research is unveiling the silent features of archaeological tourism in Pakistan with its prospects, potential and challenges. Few conserving measures also suggest to making the archaeological tourism more effective, resilient and sustainable on economic, environmental and social grounds.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL TOURISM IN PAKISTAN

Pakistan boasts an incredible wealth of heritage, with over 6,000 cultural, historical, and archaeological sites that showcase its rich history and diverse cultural legacy (Rubab, 2025). Pakistan boasts immense potential for cultural tourism, with its rich heritage sites, unique cultural experiences, and diverse attractions. The country's strategic location has witnessed various ancient civilizations, including the Indus Valley Civilization and the Gandhara Civilization, leaving behind a treasure trove of historical landmarks and artifacts. Pakistan's diverse regions offer distinct customs, languages, and arts, making it an attractive destination for visitors (Fakhar, 2010). Pakistan's rich history and heritage sites are a major draw for foreign tourists, offering a glimpse into ancient civilizations. To further boost tourism, the country aims to develop structured tours, business events, conferences, and tourism infrastructure (Abuhala et al., 2023). Despite challenges like violence, poverty, and political instability, adventurous travelers and locals alike are drawn to Pakistan's allure, eager to explore its beauty and culture (Khan et al., 2022).

Pakistan boasts world-renowned archaeological sites like Mohenjo-Daro, Harappa, Taxila, and Swat, making archaeology tourism vital for the country and globally significant. These ancient sites dating back to 3000 BC, including iconic locations like Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa. Additional highlights include the historic Chaukundi and Makli graves, showcasing the country's rich cultural heritage. Protecting these sites is essential for preserving Pakistan's history and cultural identity. Pakistan's archaeological sites and museums showcase its rich cultural heritage, connecting past and present. Preserving these archaeological sites is crucial for promoting tourism, economic growth, and national identity.

UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE SITES IN PAKISTAN

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation's (UNESCO) classified six renowned World Heritage Sites in Pakistan and many sites in tentative too. These sites classified as cultural sites including the Archaeological Ruins at Moenjodaro, an ancient Indus Valley Civilization city, offering insights into one of the world's earliest urban civilizations. Second the Buddhist Ruins of Takht-i-Bahi and Sahr-i-Bahlol, a remarkably well-preserved Buddhist archeological monastic complex and neighboring city remains from the 1st century AD. On third, the Fort and Shalamar Gardens in Lahore placed, the two distinct sites from the Mughal Empire demonstrating exquisite Mughal architecture and artistry, including the Lahore Fort and the garden's terraced design with waterways. Fourth is the Historical Monuments at Makli Necropolis (Thatta), a vast graveyard (necropolis) on Makli Hill, one of the largest funerary sites in the world, featuring elaborate 14th century tombs. Fifth is the Rohtas Fort, near Jhelum city, a 16th century fort built by Sher Shah Suri, serving as an exceptional example of early Muslim military architecture. Sixth and last is the Taxila, a complex type of archaeological site that showcase the development of urban centers and the Gandhara civilization over several centuries (The Express Tribune, 2015) (Figure 3).

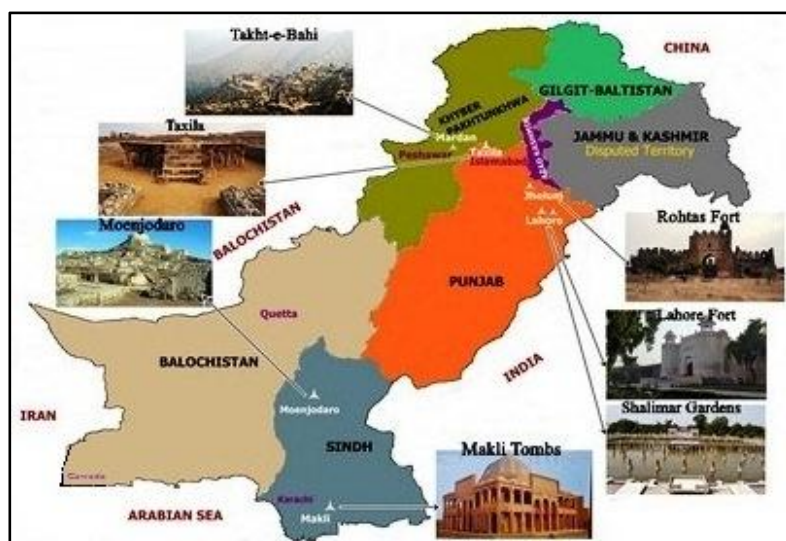


Figure 1: UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Pakistan

Source: <https://destinationpakistanguide.com/key-facts-pakistan/>

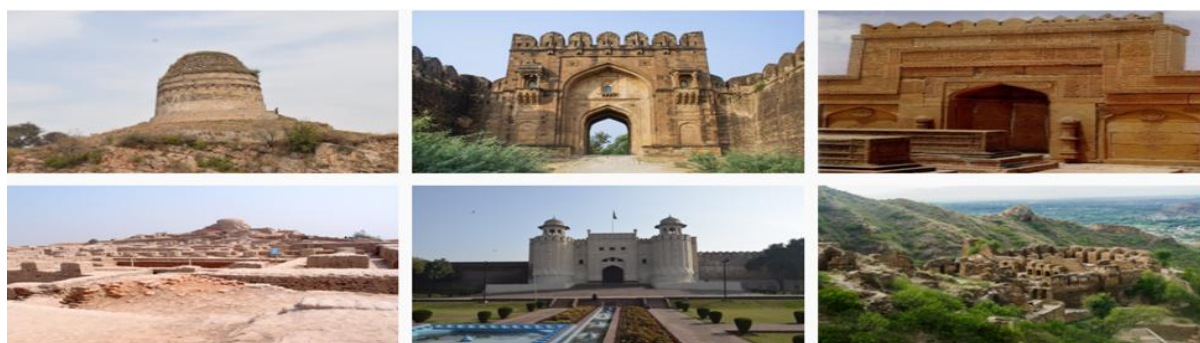


Figure 2: UNESCO World Heritage Sites in Pakistan

Source: Rubab (2025)

Pakistan is a treasure trove of archaeological sites, showcasing Indus, Buddhist, and Sikh civilizations. The country's rich heritage is reflected in Gandhara art and local culture. With hundreds of sites in Swat, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Punjab and Sindh (including Kot Diji) (Figure 3), Pakistan offers unparalleled opportunities for archaeology tourism, making it a paradise for history enthusiasts (Pakistantourism.com, 2025). Pakistan is home to ancient civilizations, boasting rich cultural heritage, including the Indus Valley Civilization, Mughal Empire, and Gandharan Civilization. Cholistan, with a 4000-year history, is a cradle of civilization, where historical legacy continues to influence the local customs and social norms (Ahsan, 2005).

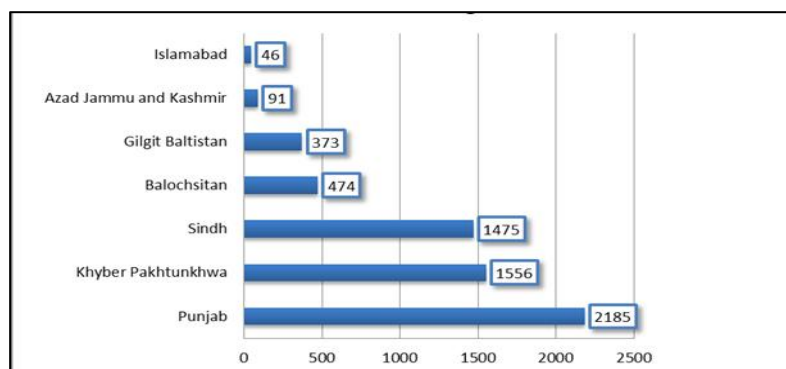


Figure 3: Province-wise Heritage Sites in Pakistan
Source: The Urban Unit (2021)

PROSPECTS OF TOURISM IN PAKISTAN

Despite challenges, tourism contributes around 5% to Pakistan's GDP and has generated over 300,000 jobs, with ambitious plans to increase this number to 500,000. The government has launched initiatives like the "Visit Pakistan" campaign and eased visa policies to attract more visitors, showcasing the country's rich cultural heritage and natural beauty (Ullah et al., 2021). A survey results of a study undertaken in Bahawalpur verified that most of the respondents (91%) visited the archeological site few times in year and overwhelmingly (98%) were agreed on protecting the cultural and historical archeological heritage (Abuhala et al., 2023). Moreover, the engagement of local communities, adaptation of sustainable tourism practices, and fostering collaboration among government, international organizations, and private stakeholders. Effective heritage management and responsible tourism can make Taxila a model for preserving archaeological sites, driving cultural and economic growth in Pakistan (Khan et al., 2025).

Potential of Tourism in Pakistan

Pakistan boasts immense tourism potential, featuring breathtaking landscapes, including the world's highest mountains and stunning lakes, making it a hotspot for adventurers and travelers alike (Hussain and Kakepoto, 2024). Pakistan's vast potential for cultural and heritage tourism, leveraging its ancient and medieval heritage to attract tourists. However, it also emphasizes the need to address challenges faced by international and domestic tourists to unlock this potential (Tasneem et al., 2022).

Challenges of Tourism in Pakistan

Pakistan's tourism industry faces challenges due to political instability, inadequate promotion of tourist sites, and security concerns, which deter international visitors and hinder the sector's growth. These issues contribute to a perception of instability, affecting the country's economic prospects and potential

for tourism development (Mohsin et al., 2024). Pakistan's tourism sector has experienced fluctuations due to political and security concerns, yet it remains a significant economic driver, with the current government prioritizing its growth and development (Ullah et al., 2021). Tourism growth is also hindered by challenges including language barriers, terrorism threats, and inadequate infrastructure (Hussain and Kakepoto, 2024). Additionally, tourism industry faces significant barriers, including the absence of a national tourism management body, security concerns, visa issues, poor coordination among departments, lack of private investment, inadequate provincial tourism organizations, ineffective marketing, poor infrastructure, limited technology use, and insufficient workforce development. These challenges hinder the sector's growth (Waheed and Kalhor, 2023). Furthermore, the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) tourism initiative requires careful consideration of archaeological and cultural preservation. Strategies should focus on promoting cultural heritage tourism, implementing sustainable practices, and fostering stakeholder collaboration to protect historic sites while driving economic growth (Khan et al., 2022).

Archaeological Tourism in Punjab

Punjab is the biggest province of Pakistan regarding the population and a bunch of landscapes and traditional/ historical monuments. Punjab's tourism assets are clustered around three regions: the northern cluster centered in Rawalpindi, with attractions like Murree and Attock; Lahore as a standalone node for culture, arts, and urban tourism; and the southern region, with Multan and Bahawalpur as key nodes, connecting to the Cholistan region including the chain of ancient forts like Derawar Fort and Sulaiman mountain range (Figure 4). Each node can be developed with improved connectivity and infrastructure to enhance tourism potential (The Urban Unit, 2021). The thorough ranking of the districts of Punjab based on their Tourism Potential is given in table 1 showing that high class archaeological hubs of the region including Attock, Bahawalpur, Kasur, Lahore, Multan, and Rawalpindi with a score over 60. The table followed by figure based on these heritage zones and visualizing the detailed depiction of the major topographic features and heritage sites.

Table 1: District-wise Score on Existing and Potential Tourism Assets in Punjab

Sr.#	District	Rank	Sr.#	District	Rank
1	Attock	65	19	Lodhran	28
2	Bahawalnagar	25	20	Mandi Bahauddin	28
3	Bahawalpur	88	21	Mianwali	23
4	Bhakkar	28	22	Multan	85
5	Chakwal	55	23	Muzaffargarh	28
6	Chiniot	28	24	Narowal	23
7	Dera Ghazi Khan	45	25	Nankana Sahi	58
8	Faisalabad	48	26	Okara	41
9	Gujranwala	51	27	Pakpattan	33
10	Gujrat	26	28	Rahim Yar Khan	43
11	Hafizabad	23	29	Rajanpur	43
12	Jhang	38	30	Rawalpindi	88
13	Jhelum	55	31	Sahiwal	40
14	Kasur	68	32	Sargodha	38
15	Khanewal	33	33	Sheikhupura	45
16	Khushab	43	34	Sialkot	38
17	Lahore	95	35	Toba Tek Singh	33
18	Layyah	23	36	Vehari	18

Source: The Urban Unit (2021)

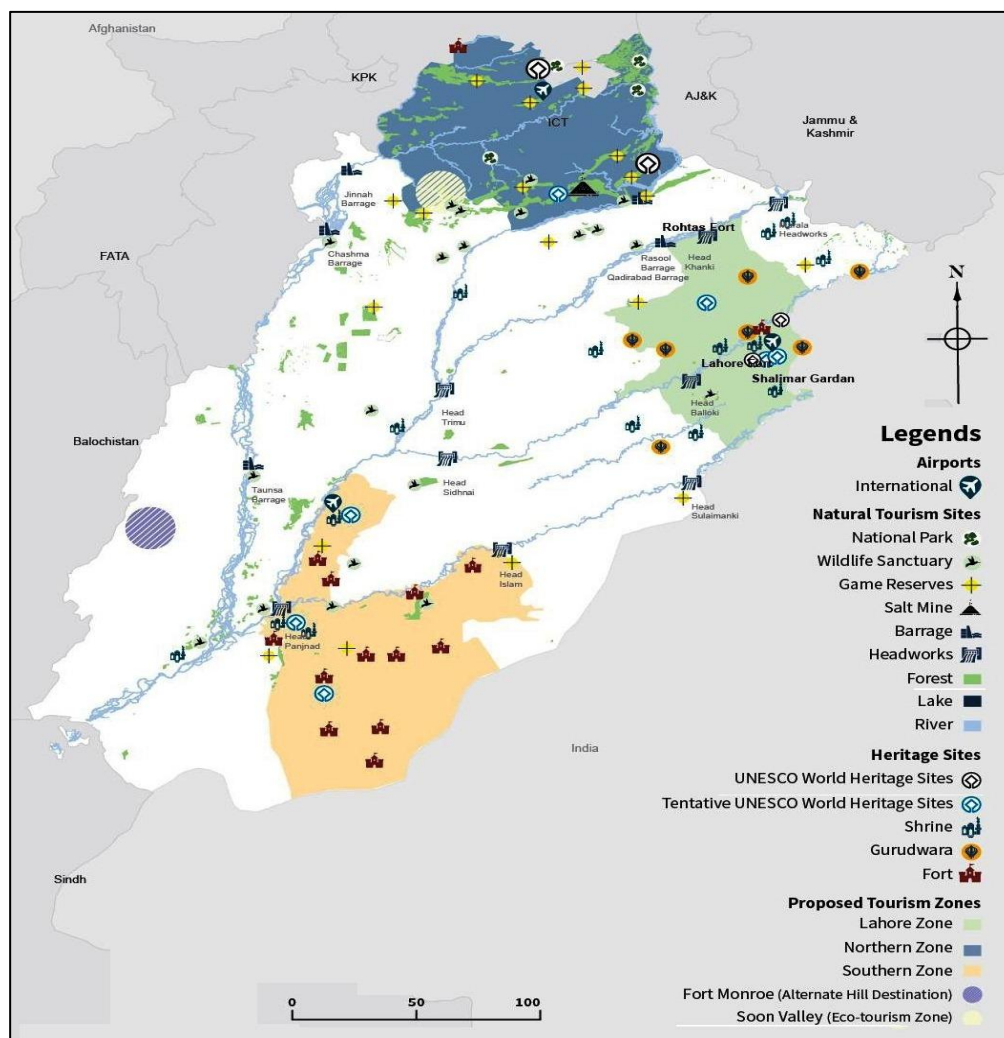


Figure 4: Identified Tourism Zones with Peculiar Tourism Sites/ Features in Punjab
Source: Adopted and Modified from The Urban Unit (2021)

CONCLUSION

Pakistan's archaeological tourism sector holds immense potential, with over 6,000 heritage sites and six UNESCO World Heritage Sites, including Mohenjo-Daro, Taxila, and the Buddhist Ruins of Takht-i-Bahi. These sites offer a glimpse into the country's rich cultural and historical heritage, spanning thousands of years. However, challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, security concerns, and lack of effective management hinder the sector's growth. To unlock its potential, Pakistan needs to incentivize sustainable tourism, establish robust regulations, and invest in site conservation and infrastructure development. By addressing these challenges, Pakistan can capitalize on its archaeological treasures, promote cultural exchange, and boost economic growth. Key to success will be balancing tourism development with site preservation and community engagement, ensuring a sustainable and responsible tourism industry.

SUGGESTIONS

Responsible tourism must address the key issues, including socioeconomic, environmental, and economic concerns, promoting sustainable tourism practices (Waheed and Kalhor, 2023). The effective management policies for conserving and protecting the heritage sites are vital. In addition, highlighting the issues in archaeological tourism and heritage management, providing guidelines to mitigate threats from tourism and promote sustainable preservation (Khan and Shakirullah, 2020). Hence, this research suggests the following key measures to boost the tourism in general and archaeological in particular in the country to make it more sustainable, unique and profitable economic sector;

1. Infrastructure Development, first of all is more significant. Improve roads, air links, and eco-friendly lodging facilities to facilitate seamless travel experiences.
2. Sustainable Tourism Practices also required for implementing eco-friendly practices, such as waste management systems and environmental conservation efforts.
3. Empower local communities through community engagement training programs, job opportunities, and community-led tourism initiatives.
4. Digital Marketing promotions through leveraging social media, travel documentaries, and influencer partnerships to promote Pakistan's unique attractions and cultural experiences.
5. Public-Private Partnerships is also a positive initiative to foster collaborations between government agencies, private sector, and local communities to drive tourism growth and development in right channel.

By adopting these strategies, Pakistan can harness the potential of tourism to drive economic growth, promote cultural exchange, and preserve its natural and cultural heritage.

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