

**Award Rationale**

**Nuratau Community Based Tourism Project – Responsible Travel  
in Uzbekistan**



**Dagmar Schreiber**

**on behalf of**

**Institute for Tourism and Development (Studienkreis für Tourismus und Entwicklung e.V.)**

**December 2022**

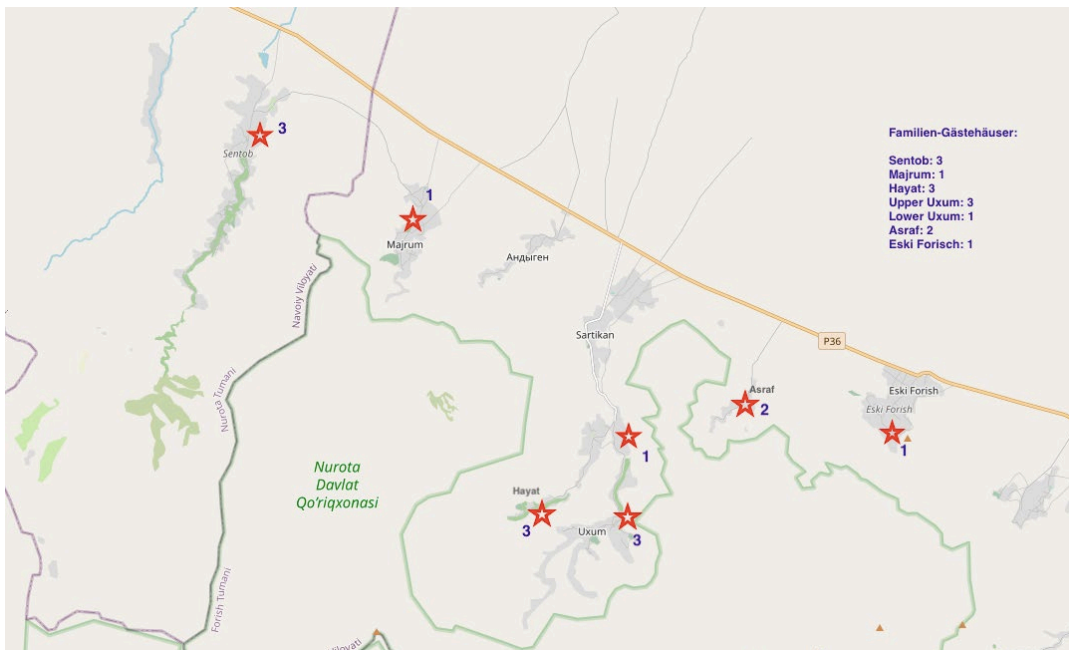
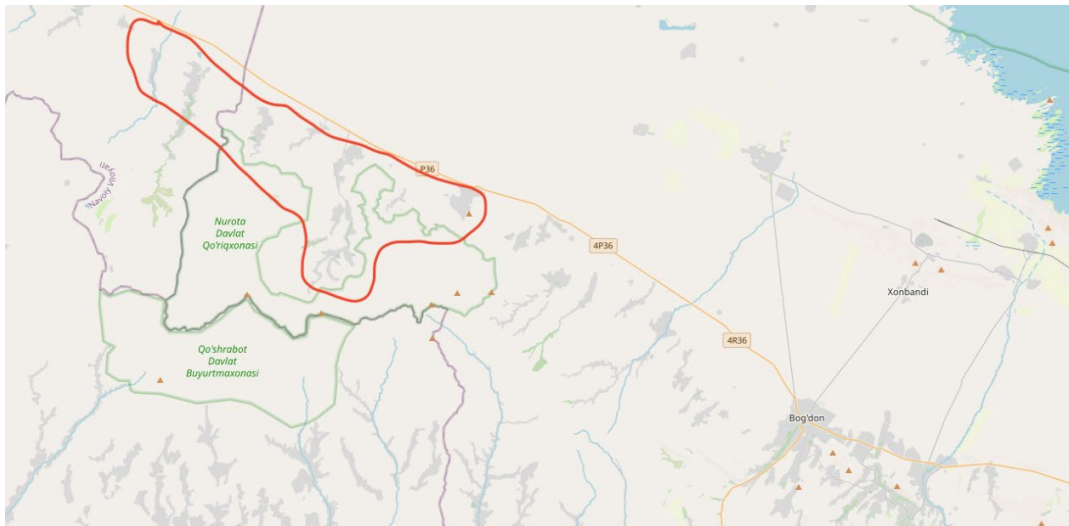
## Contents

Glossary / Abbreviations	2
Maps	3
1. Introduction	4
2. Background and Setting	4
3. The Nuratau Community Based Tourism Project and its Relevance	5
4. Evaluation against the TO DO Award criteria	7
5. Conclusion	10
6. Documents	10
Contact Award Winner	11
Organiser and Sponsors	11

### Glossary / Abbreviations:

CBT	Community Based Tourism
Aksakal	Literally: White beard. Village elder, democratically elected
Mahalla	Village community
Hokim	Head of executive authority, at different levels (town, district, region)

**Map: Greater Samarkand area – Bukhara / Nuratau / villages in the project region**



## 1 INTRODUCTION

The application for the TO DO Award 2023 was submitted by the LLC Responsible Travel from Bog'don in Uzbekistan and the project was nominated by the TO DO Award jury. From 3rd to 9th December, 2022 expert Dagmar Schreiber travelled in Uzbekistan on behalf of the Institute for Tourism and Development (Studienkreis für Tourismus und Entwicklung) in order to check on location the information given in the documents submitted by the Nuratau Community Based Tourism Project.

Based on her insights and findings, the author recommends awarding the NURATAU COMMUNITY BASED TOURISM PROJECT with the TO DO Award 2023.

## 2 BACKGROUND AND SETTING

Uzbekistan is the only Central Asian post-Soviet country which during Soviet times already had tourism worth mentioning, showcasing Tashkent, Samarkand and Bukhara, and a little later also Shahrissabz and Khiva. These towns were literally 'dressed up' for tourists. They had hotels of international standard and many well-trained guides who were able to stage perfect guided tours in all world languages, focussing on history, architecture, handicrafts, music, or dance. What was undesirable was tourists' looking behind the scenes or getting to know small towns and villages, let alone their inhabitants. After Uzbekistan had gained state sovereignty, this policy was continued. Big tourist groups from various countries were guided through the most important places along the Great Silk Route, in coaches with guides. Side trips were not welcomed.

However, there are many areas in Uzbekistan that would complement the concept of Silk Road tourism in an excellent manner, in terms of landscapes and history, ethnic diversity, and culture. No doubt, one of the most interesting areas is the Nuratau mountain range.

The Nuratau mountains extend over 170 kilometres in the eastern part of central Uzbekistan, protecting the oases of Bukhara and Samarkand against cold winds from the Kazakh steppe. Extending alongside this mountain range, in the north there is the huge Aydarkul Lake, a shallow water body rich in fish. Between the Nuratau mountains and Aydarkul Lake there is steppe land. On the other side of the lake is the Kyzylkum desert, part of which is densely overgrown with saksaul and shrubs. This diversity of landscapes also brings forth a diversity of flora and fauna, making the greater Nuratau-Aydarkul an interesting area for travellers with a special interest in ornithology and botany, particularly in the months of April and May (migration of birds).

The Nuratau itself is an arid steppe mountain range with elevations of up to 2,170 metres and many small valleys. In those valleys, where clean mountain streams create a mild micro climate, there are deciduous forests and mountain grasslands with juniper mats. In these valleys, people already settled thousands of years ago. Some of these old villages still exist, others were abandoned. Especially after the Soviets forcibly resettled entire mountain communities to the cotton growing areas, many villages became deserted.

The residents of the few villages that exist to date are mainly ethnic Tajiks. With their culture of fruit cultivation and smallholder livestock breeding they are adapted to living in the rocky mountain valleys. They build their houses using locally available materials (natural stone, mud). Artistically layered walls and woven fences protect their gardens against livestock grazing. The villagers collect and process walnuts, mulberries, and hawthorn; they grow grapes, apricots, pomegranates, khakis, apples, cherries, quinces, vegetables, and potatoes. Most of the households live on subsistence farming, keeping their own cows, sheep, and goats, in most cases also donkeys or even horses.

The possibilities to develop tourism are manifold. As the villages are located between Bukhara, Samarkand, and Lake Aydarkul, staying there for two or three days makes a welcome change, as on the Silk Road tours travellers may after two or three days feel overwhelmed by the blue domes of mosques and medreses. The simple and still very authentic life in the Nuratau mountains and the opportunity of

valley hopping present a good contrast to the predominantly staged glamour of the towns of Samarkand, Bukhara, Khiva, and Shahrissabz. In combination with a visit to the yurt camps run by ethnic Kazakhs at Lake Aydarkul, staying in the Nuratau mountains can greatly enrich a trip to Uzbekistan, culturally and in terms of the ethnic diversity encountered.

### **3 THE NURATAU COMMUNITY BASED TOURISM PROJECT AND ITS RELEVANCE**

#### **3.1 History and Objectives**

In the early 2000s, Henry Mix, a film maker from Germany specialised in wildlife documentaries, had the idea to develop sustainable tourism in the remote villages of the Nuratau mountains in order to tap alternatives sources of income for the villagers who lived on subsistence farming. He had noticed that the Severtzov argali (wild sheep) endemic to this region were facing extinction and that the small forest areas in the narrow river valleys were rapidly being decimated. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and its state-run economic structures, most of the local people had lost their employment and were so poor that they had to resort to poaching and felling trees to support their families.

The idea was discussed with the village elders and was then slowly but steadily being implemented. It gained major momentum thanks to the commitment of project leader Sherzod Nurbekov who joined the project in 2008. Together with partners he initially opened six guesthouses in three villages and offered tours. With technical assistance of the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ), the German Development Service (DED) and the German Embassy, and with their support for training programmes he created conditions which eventually made it possible for him to overcome the government's resistance to the project.

The main obstacle was the uncertain status of the project, as it was not legally defined. The legally defined tourism facilities included hotels, tour operators, and travel agents, but did not include local associations formed by individuals. The project was twice denied the government license which it desperately needed, though, in order to continue to function.

The reason behind this demonstratively dismissive behaviour by the authorities was their fear of losing face, i.e. the government's reluctance to give foreigners a chance to get insights into the daily lives of people in Uzbekistan. Tourists were supposed to identify Uzbekistan with the perfect scenes of places along the Silk Road, but not with the seemingly idyllic, but by no means easy lives of small mountain communities in the Nuratau, with their power cuts, dilapidated village schools, and dangerous access routes.

Sherzod Nurbekov and the first six guesthouse operators did not get discouraged and tried a different approach in 2015/2016. Each of the guesthouses applied for a separate licence as accommodation facility. That worked. The fact that the autocratic president Islom Karimov had died in 2016 may have facilitated this change.

What happened then proved the project planners right. Double and triple digit growth rates in tourist arrivals finally generated what they had hoped for: an income to be reinvested in the modernisation of houses, children's education, and social projects such as water supply and school refurbishment.

In the meantime, the government also got convinced by the success of the project. A vocational training school has been opened in the lower village of Oxum (Uhum). At the request of the project management and the aksakals, it also offers training in tourism. The access road to two of the villages has been paved, river banks have been reinforced, and street lights have been installed. Mobile phone antennas covering all the villages are in the pipeline.

### 3.2 Concept and Programme

The concept is based on three basic assumptions:

1. Socio-economic: The local population in the Nuratau mountains urgently needs an additional monetary income, as subsistence farming and the income from the sale of some of their crops/livestock are not sufficient to ensure decent livelihoods for the families and a good education for their children. Due to lack of employment opportunities, many young people are forced to migrate to the cities or even to Russia (as migrant workers).
2. Ecological: Poverty leads to severe pressure on nature (overgrazing, hunting, and logging) and to a degeneration of natural resources. That is why an additional income is helpful; it can reduce the pressure on nature. The villagers can buy fuel and do not need to keep overly large herds as "substitutes for bank accounts".
3. Touristic: Guests visiting Uzbekistan should be able to gain diverse and possibly comprehensive insights into life in the country. Just visiting Silk Road towns is not sufficient. A visit to the villages in the Nuratau mountains may help diversify tour programmes in such a way that the tourists get more comprehensive and more genuine impressions.

An additional income from tourism is realistic. The villages meet almost all necessary conditions to organise community-based tourism:

- Hospitality as a "basic characteristic" of Tajik and Uzbek families
- Strong village communities (mahallas) with functioning traditional grassroots democracies and a high level of mutual trust
- Workers who are willing to learn
- Interesting traditions and crafts
- A beautiful cultural landscape to see and for hiking (valley hopping)
- Vacant rooms or even vacant houses due to migration to the cities, and plots of land for the construction of guest houses. If families have none of these, during the warm season they often vacate one or two rooms and make them available to guests while the families themselves sleep on the terrace or on the tapchan (a large wooden frame in the garden)
- Home-grown food to prepare good and healthy dishes

Following these considerations, the organisation Tabiat Forish/ later Nuratau Ecotourism/ since 2012 Nuratau Community Based Tourism Project was founded in 2008. An office was established in the Bog'don district centre and is in charge of advertising, organisation, and bookings. So far, the office is the only place with a stable internet and telephone connection.

At the moment (December 2022) there are 14 family guesthouses providing a total of about 200 bedsteads. Some aspirants will be joining soon. A few men work as guides and horse or donkey handlers on the tours. Many families are called to help when there are many guests at the same time. Some households supply food. Depending on the number of guest houses, 15-40 percent of the population in the six villages are involved in the project.

The guesthouses and tours are mostly booked through the organisation's website. 15 percent of the income (ten percent during the first two years of operation) is retained by the office to cover current expenses and pay four employees (six employees in the peak season), the rest of the income goes to the families. All members meet regularly about once a year in a general assembly in order to decide on the utilisation of part of the funds to implement social projects in the villages. These projects are implemented through hashar, the traditional form of community work in Central Asian countries. They strengthen the village communities' ownership of the tourism project.

## 4 EVALUATION AGAINST THE TO DO AWARD CRITERIA

Assessing the activities of the Nuratau Community Based Tourism Project against the contest criteria for the TO DO Award leads to the following evaluation:

### 4.1. Participation

#### **How were/are the interests and needs of the local population taken into account in the planning phase and throughout the project?**

All plans and decisions are discussed from A to Z with the aksakals of the mahallas, and decisions are jointly taken. These aksakals represent the interests of the entire community and have an overview of the needs and problems of all the families. In this way they ensure that the tourism project is an integral part of community development. While running the tourism project, 26 social projects were realised in and with the villages. The entire community benefits from these projects. Particularly important examples include:

- 50 kilometres of water pipes laid by the villagers from 2013 to 2019, partly together with committed guests. 120 families in five villages were connected to the water supply
- Repairs, renovations, and equipment of the village schools of Asraf and Hayat with the assistance of committed guests
- Repair of a water wheel and restoration of a community centre
- English courses for guides and homestay operators

### 4.2. Economic Benefit

#### **Ensuring the economic participation of broad local population strata in tourism**

In the six villages of the project area there are almost 900 households with about 5,000 people. In addition to the extended families of the 14 guest house operators who directly benefit from the flow of visitors, there are six drivers and three guides. (There were more before the pandemic and intensive efforts are being made to recruit new drivers and guides). Many other people in the villages are involved through the supply of food, short-term transport services, technical assistance, provision of pack animals (donkeys, horses), sale of souvenirs and agricultural products, and cultural events.

### 4.3. Awareness Raising

#### **Enhancing the awareness of local people with regard to the chances and risks of tourism development for their economic, social and cultural lives**

The opportunities tourism development brings to the Nuratau mountain villages are obvious.

The original idea of diversifying, stabilising and increasing incomes could be realised. The villages opened up to low-impact tourism and also benefit from it as a community. Improved infrastructure (road construction, stabilisation of parts of the embankments of mountain streams, street lights, mobile phone network) and renovation of schools, creation of jobs, communication with the "wide world", incentives for better education, opportunities for improved nature conservation – all these are the pros the villagers noted. So far, the good community spirit in the villages has not suffered due to tourism. All decisions are taken jointly with the mahallas and their elected leaders.

At the same time, there is an awareness of the risks involved. It is not possible to prevent any influence on the rather authentic culture in the mountain villages, but conscious efforts are being made to minimise those impacts. For example, care is taken not to permit an "over-modernisation" of the guest houses. A few simple rules for guests visiting the villages were formulated in the website:

<https://www.nuratau.com/community-based-tourism/behavior-rules-in-the-countryside/>

In the year before the pandemic, almost 6,000 people visited the villages, pushing them close to their limits in terms of availability of staff. There was a shortage of guides for trekking tours. If demand continues to increase, at some point a limit will be reached where there is a risk of overtourism and where the number of visitors per village/valley will need to be capped. There is trust in the intuition and prudence of the mahallas.

The possibility that the idyllic green valleys might one day be hijacked by the tourism industry is ruled out. The unity and strength of the community would prevent that from happening.

#### **4.4. Cultural Identity**

##### **Strengthening local culture and the cultural identity of local people, avoiding/minimising any social and cultural damage caused by tourism, supporting intercultural encounters and exchange between hosts and guests**

As part of the tourism project, 26 social projects have so far been realised, many of them with the participation of tourist groups. One outstanding example is the participation of European student groups in installing water pipes to the villages. During four-day work programmes, the student groups were introduced to their host families and to the village community. Together with the villagers, each student group installed one section of the water pipe. Finally, they jointly celebrated the work they had accomplished, as it is common in the villages.

For these work programmes the project leaders had prepared special information sheets which in a very sensitive manner provide an insight into village life, explain cultural peculiarities, and the social rules in the villages – a model of intercultural communication.

#### **4.5. Decent Work**

##### **Creation of qualified jobs and/or improvement of the working conditions in tourism with regard to social security, working hours, education and training, and remuneration**

Community-based tourism in the villages of the Nuratau mountain range is a seasonal business from late March to late October. There are peak seasons (April-June) during which fixed working hours cannot be kept. However, the project participants are self-employed (sole proprietors) and can decide this for themselves. They are ready to accept it because they can take rest in the less busy months (in July/August and in winter). The families are in charge of their own social security. Contributions to their pension insurances get paid.

The wages for jobs in the guest houses and for the guides/drivers are discussed and voted on in the general assembly meetings, the members are satisfied with what they get paid and consider it fair.

Training permanently is a concern of the coordination office in Bog'don. It has regularly been organising training programmes for guest house operators and guides: business planning, safety and first aid, cooking and hygiene, organisation of tours, intercultural particularities, English.

#### **4.6. Gender Equality**

##### **Equal participation of women and men in planning and implementation processes within the frame of their cultural background and values**

At first sight it might seem that women are disadvantaged, as in the household they often appear only in the background. There are cultural reasons for this, given a rather clear natural division of labour between men and women (hard work outside and in the fields / household chores), and change happens



only slowly. In decisions related to the household, however, women's voices carry at least the same weight as their husbands' and they have an equal say.

Women are often in a leading role in cooking and handicraft workshops. Especially if the tourist groups include women, they will notice that after some time there will be very cordial kind of communication.

By opening up rural communities to tourism which were previously very secluded, 15 years of project work have contributed significantly to girls being allowed to go to university once they finished school, even in cities far away. This was not common in the past.

#### **4.7. Environmental Sustainability**

##### **Taking into account criteria of low environmental and climate impact and sustainable use of natural resources**

There is water scarcity in the Nuratau mountains and the trees are few, due to the climatic conditions and additional anthropogenic factors that aggravate the situation. The locals economise in their resource use, they hardly use heating and mainly cook with dried dung and cheap cotton straw. The presence of thousands of tourists in addition to local inhabitants poses a danger of over-exploitation of resources, especially of water and wood. That's why nine out of 14 guesthouses already use solar thermal energy to heat water for the showers, the others guesthouses will follow. Some guesthouses already use photovoltaic systems.

Water is supplied very sparingly through thin pipes; guests are informed by their hosts about the scarcity of water and are encouraged to use water sparingly.

The houses/guesthouses are built with materials that are available locally (stones, mud, fast-growing poplar timber). The interior is also mostly made of local materials (part of the furniture, carpets, bedspreads, seat mats, even the lampshades in some of the houses). Food is prepared by using almost exclusively locally grown crops and animal products.

Waste is avoided by buying very few products from supermarkets, so that hardly any packaging is needed. If packaging waste is generated, it is usually used very creatively for upcycling. Paper/cardboard is burnt, the small amounts of glass and plastic waste are collected and kept for collection by "Luli" (Roma who collect and utilise waste).

Sewage goes into septic tanks at a minimum distance from mountain streams.

The income from tourism enables households to buy coal for heating purposes and gas cylinders for cooking, both of which would not be affordable otherwise, and to refrain from cutting wood.

#### **4.8. Future Sustainability**

##### **Ensuring the economic and institutional sustainability of the project**

The measures taken to contain the Covid-19 pandemic almost "starved" the project in 2020/21. At the moment, however, the number of guests is again on the increase, also thanks to the Uzbek government's strategy to promote domestic tourism in 2021. Domestic tourism still plays a minor role here in the Nuratau mountains, but could gain importance in the future.

Some families are very interested in joining. "Established" members take charge of providing basic training to the new ones. A comprehensive training is planned for 2023 in Tashkent, if the project wins the TO DO Award and receives the prize money. The training ensures both quantitative and qualitative sustainability for the guesthouses.

At the moment, one problem is how to find qualified guides at relatively short notice. Before the pandemic there were nine persons who regularly worked as guides. Due to the absence of tourists during two years of pandemic, most of them had to find new jobs and are no longer available. As of

December 2022, there are only three guides left, but five to ten will be needed for the season in 2023. Young people from the villages are being recruited and trained, but it will take some time until they have acquired the basic knowledge they need and have also gained the necessary experience.

As the project generates 70 percent of its income from the sale of tour packages, good, reliable guides with adequate language skills are of particular importance.

A very important moment in a country like Uzbekistan is the moment the project is accepted by the local authorities and the Ministry of Tourism. It has now been a year that the project has been having their acceptance. A new district hokim supports the project, especially in terms of infrastructure. He was so impressed by Sherzod Norbekov's work and its results that he wants to make him his tourism advisor with effect from 2023. The district authorities are now convinced of the effectiveness of community-based tourism and would like to promote more family-/community-based guesthouses in other villages.

## **5 CONCLUSION**

The project is one of the first CBT projects in Uzbekistan. Pioneer work has been done here under difficult circumstances. The fact that the project organisers did not give up, but made use of all new obstacles to improve their resilience, their skills, and their perseverance cannot be appreciated highly enough. The extremely valuable support of GIZ, DED and the German Embassy was used to develop and implement a sustainable concept that offers a viable future for the villages in the Nuratau mountains. Without the economic effects of the tourism project, which de facto has a direct or indirect influence on all the households in the villages, many men would migrate to Russia either temporarily as guest workers or permanently. Families would disintegrate, houses would be abandoned and villages would become deserted.

All the social, economic and environmental aspects of the project assessed allow for the conclusion that the "Nuratau Community Based Tourism Project" deserves the TO DO Award 2023.

## **6 DOCUMENTS**

Fauna and Flora of the Nuratau-Kyzylkum area, in four languages, 84 pages, produced with the support of GIZ (Hannelore Bendsen)

## Contact Award Winner:

Sherzod Norbekov  
Nuratau Community Based Tourism Project  
34, Amir Temur Str., 131200 Bog'don  
Jizzax Region, Uzbekistan

Phone: +998 93 558 4480 131200  
e-mail: [travelresponsible@gmail.com](mailto:travelresponsible@gmail.com)  
[www.nuratau.com](http://www.nuratau.com)

---

## Organiser of the TO DO Award 2023 – Contest Socially Responsible Tourism:



**Studienkreis für Tourismus und Entwicklung e.V.**  
**Bahnhofstraße 8, 82229 Seefeld, Germany**  
Phone +49-(0)8152-999010, Fax: +49-(0)8152-9990166  
E-Mail: [info@studienkreis.org](mailto:info@studienkreis.org)  
[www.studienkreis.org](http://www.studienkreis.org)  
[www.todo-contest.org](http://www.todo-contest.org)

## in cooperation with:

Gefördert durch:

**ENGAGEMENT  
GLOBAL**  
Service für Entwicklungsinitiativen



Mit Mitteln des:



Bundesministerium für  
wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit  
und Entwicklung

**Brot  
für die Welt**  
TOURISM WATCH



**Studiosus**



**SST**  
Schweizerische Stiftung für Solidarität im Tourismus  
Swiss Foundation for Solidarity in Tourism

## Prize Money by:

**SST**  
Schweizerische Stiftung für Solidarität im Tourismus  
Swiss Foundation for Solidarity in Tourism