

PAKISTAN TOURISM, ART AND CULTURE

WIDE ANALYSIS REPORT — 2026

Executive Assessment

Pakistan possesses an unusually broad tourism, artistic and cultural portfolio: high mountain landscapes, deserts and coastlines; archaeological remains from the Indus Valley and Gandhara civilizations; Mughal, Sikh and Islamic architecture; living folk traditions; literature, music, crafts, food and contemporary creative industries. The country's tourism proposition is therefore not a single destination product but a collection of regional experiences.

The strategic opportunity is to connect heritage, nature, culture and creative industries into sustainable visitor economies. Pakistan Tourism Development Corporation describes tourism development as a national priority that should contribute to quality of life while protecting cultural and natural heritage.

Report focus

- Tourism geography and major destination categories.
- Archaeological and architectural heritage.
- Traditional and contemporary arts.
- Regional cultural diversity and living heritage.
- Creative industries, museums, festivals and cultural institutions.
- Tourism infrastructure, sustainability and community participation.
- Opportunities, risks and a 2026–2035 strategic outlook.

The report treats tourism, art and culture as interconnected parts of Pakistan's social identity, international image and potential creative economy.

1. TOURISM LANDSCAPE OF PAKISTAN

Pakistan's geography creates several distinct tourism markets. The northern mountain regions offer trekking, mountaineering, valleys and winter tourism; Punjab and Sindh contain major archaeological and architectural heritage; Balochistan offers dramatic coastal and desert landscapes; and urban centres provide museums, food, crafts, festivals and contemporary cultural experiences.

Major tourism categories

- Mountain and adventure tourism: Himalaya, Karakoram and Hindu Kush landscapes, trekking, climbing and nature-based travel.
- Heritage tourism: Mohenjo-daro, Taxila, Lahore Fort, Shalimar Gardens, Makli and Rohtas Fort, among many other sites.
- Religious and pilgrimage tourism: Sikh, Buddhist, Islamic and other historical religious heritage.
- Cultural tourism: folk traditions, music, crafts, cuisine, festivals, literature and regional lifestyles.
- Coastal and nature tourism: Arabian Sea coastline, national parks, forests, wetlands and desert landscapes.
- Urban and creative tourism: museums, galleries, architecture, food, fashion, film and performing arts.

Market opportunity

The strongest growth opportunity lies in combining destination infrastructure with authentic local experiences. Visitors increasingly seek stories, community interaction, heritage interpretation and nature rather than isolated sightseeing. Pakistan can therefore develop multi-day cultural circuits that connect cities, archaeological sites, mountain areas and craft communities.

2. WORLD HERITAGE AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL TREASURES

Pakistan currently has six properties inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List: Archaeological Ruins at Moenjodaro; Taxila; Buddhist Ruins of Takht-i-Bahi and Neighbouring City Remains at Sahr-i-Bahlol; Fort and Shalamar Gardens in Lahore; Historical Monuments at Makli, Thatta; and Rohtas Fort.

Civilizational layers

- Indus Valley civilization: urban planning, archaeology and material culture represented by sites such as Moenjodaro.
- Gandhara: Buddhist archaeology, sculpture and the ancient cultural connections of Taxila and the northwest.
- Islamic and Mughal heritage: mosques, forts, gardens, tombs, urban architecture and decorative arts.
- Regional historic landscapes: Sindh's necropolises and architecture, Punjab's forts and gardens, and Balochistan's archaeological and cultural landscapes.

Heritage opportunity

UNESCO notes that Pakistan has a much larger potential heritage portfolio than its six inscribed sites. The country's Tentative List contains numerous archaeological, architectural and cultural properties. Heritage development can therefore support tourism diversification, local employment, conservation finance and international cultural diplomacy.

The challenge is preservation. Climate change, water-related hazards, urban pressure, inadequate maintenance and uncontrolled visitation can damage heritage. Conservation must therefore be treated as core tourism infrastructure rather than as a separate cultural activity.

3. ARCHITECTURE, HISTORIC CITIES AND CULTURAL LANDSCAPES

Pakistan's architectural identity reflects centuries of interaction among South Asian, Persianate, Central Asian, Islamic, Buddhist, Sikh and colonial traditions. Lahore, Multan, Peshawar, Thatta, Karachi, Rawalpindi, Taxila and other historic centres contain different layers of this history.

Key architectural themes

- Mughal gardens, forts, mosques and urban monuments.
- Sikh-era gurdwaras and associated pilgrimage landscapes.
- Gandharan Buddhist monasteries, stupas and sculpture traditions.
- Sindhi tomb architecture, glazed tilework and historic settlements.
- Traditional houses and urban forms in Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Sindh, Balochistan and the northern areas.
- Colonial and modern architecture in major cities.

Historic cities can become integrated cultural destinations when monuments are linked to museums, walking routes, food, crafts, performances and local businesses. Such models distribute tourism income beyond individual monuments and encourage communities to view conservation as economically valuable.

Urban regeneration should avoid turning heritage districts into artificial replicas. Authenticity, resident participation and adaptive reuse are more sustainable than purely cosmetic restoration.

4. TRADITIONAL ARTS, CRAFTS AND FOLK CULTURE

Pakistan's cultural richness is particularly visible in its living traditions. UNESCO describes the country's intangible heritage as including practices, expressions, knowledge and skills, oral traditions, performing arts, social practices and festivals, with distinctive traditions in every province.

Major craft and folk traditions

- Textiles, embroidery, weaving and regional dress.
- Truck art, miniature painting, calligraphy and decorative arts.
- Pottery, ceramics, woodwork, metalwork and stone crafts.
- Carpet and rug production and other traditional household crafts.
- Folk music, regional dance, storytelling and oral traditions.
- Traditional cuisine and foodways as cultural tourism assets.

Living heritage

UNESCO currently lists four Pakistani intangible-heritage elements: Suri Jagek, falconry, Nowruz and the Boreendo/Bhorindo musical-instrument tradition; the latter was added in 2025 to the Urgent Safeguarding List. This illustrates both the richness of Pakistan's living culture and the need to transfer knowledge between generations.

The strongest policy approach is to support the practitioners themselves. Craft training, fair market access, digital sales, apprenticeships, design innovation and cultural documentation can help traditions remain economically viable without removing their community ownership.

5. MUSIC, LITERATURE, FILM AND CONTEMPORARY ART

Pakistan's cultural sector is not limited to historical heritage. Contemporary music, literature, theatre, film, television, fashion, photography, visual arts and digital media contribute to the country's modern cultural identity.

Creative-sector strengths

- Rich literary traditions in Urdu, Punjabi, Sindhi, Pashto, Balochi, Saraiki and other languages.
- Classical and folk music alongside contemporary Pakistani music.
- Strong traditions of calligraphy, miniature painting and visual arts.
- Growing fashion, design, photography and digital-content ecosystems.
- Film, television and online media with potential for international distribution.
- Universities, museums, galleries and cultural organisations that can support creative research and education.

UNESCO's culture strategy for Pakistan highlights cultural and creative industries, digitisation, heritage resilience, youth and community engagement. This suggests that cultural policy can increasingly be linked to entrepreneurship, technology and employment rather than treating culture only as preservation.

A stronger creative economy would require copyright protection, professional management, digital distribution, international marketing, arts education and better access to finance for creative enterprises.

6. RELIGIOUS, PILGRIMAGE AND COMMUNITY TOURISM

Pakistan contains important religious and historical landscapes associated with Islam, Sikhism, Buddhism and other traditions. Pilgrimage tourism can create sustained demand while strengthening international cultural connections.

Strategic opportunities

- Sikh heritage circuits connecting gurdwaras and historic communities.
- Buddhist and Gandharan heritage circuits centred on Taxila and northwestern archaeological sites.
- Islamic heritage including mosques, shrines, Sufi traditions, historic cities and architectural monuments.
- Community-based cultural tourism in mountain and rural regions.

Religious tourism requires especially careful management. Visitor facilities, conservation, security, interpretation, accessibility and respect for local religious practices should be designed together. Community participation is essential because sacred places are living environments rather than ordinary tourist attractions.

A well-managed pilgrimage strategy can generate accommodation, transport, guiding, handicraft and food-service opportunities while improving international understanding of Pakistan's plural historical heritage.

7. TOURISM INFRASTRUCTURE AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Tourism growth depends on more than attractions. Transport, accommodation, sanitation, digital connectivity, visitor information, emergency services, environmental management and professional guiding determine whether destinations can absorb visitors safely and sustainably.

Priority infrastructure

- Reliable road and air connections to major destinations.
- Visitor centres, multilingual interpretation and digital maps.
- Safe trekking and adventure-tourism systems.
- Waste, water and sanitation systems in high-pressure destinations.
- Heritage conservation laboratories and trained professionals.
- Accessible accommodation and community-owned tourism enterprises.
- Digital booking, payments and destination information.

Sustainability

Mountain tourism is particularly sensitive to waste, water stress, erosion, construction pressure and climate change. Heritage sites face flooding, humidity, heat, pollution and urban encroachment. Sustainable tourism should therefore establish visitor-capacity standards, conservation funding, environmental monitoring and local benefit-sharing.

The objective should be higher-value tourism rather than simply higher visitor numbers: longer stays, greater local spending, better experiences and lower environmental impact.

8. CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS, MUSEUMS AND EDUCATION

Cultural institutions provide the infrastructure through which heritage becomes knowledge. Pakistan's National Heritage and Culture Division identifies preservation and promotion of cultural heritage, arts, languages, literature, archaeology, museums and historical monuments as core responsibilities.

Institutional priorities

- Strengthen national and provincial museums and archaeological departments.
- Digitise manuscripts, recordings, photographs and museum collections.
- Build professional capacity in conservation, curation and heritage management.
- Connect universities with archaeological and cultural research.
- Develop educational programmes for children and young people.
- Expand international partnerships and cultural exchanges.

Lok Virsa has historically played a major role in documenting folklore, oral traditions and regional culture. UNESCO also highlights community-based inventorying and safeguarding projects in Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. These approaches can be expanded through digital archives and participatory cultural mapping.

Museums should increasingly function as public learning and tourism anchors, not simply as collections. Interactive interpretation, multilingual content and links to surrounding historic districts can significantly increase their value.

9. OPPORTUNITIES, RISKS AND STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS

Major opportunities

- Position Pakistan as a combined mountain, heritage and cultural destination.
- Develop integrated heritage trails rather than isolated sites.
- Expand religious and pilgrimage tourism with community safeguards.
- Build adventure, eco and nature tourism around high-value landscapes.
- Grow creative industries, cultural exports and digital content.
- Support artisans through design, e-commerce, finance and international markets.
- Use tourism to create employment for youth and women in local communities.
- Attract private investment into sustainable hotels, transport, museums and visitor services.

Key risks

- Climate change, floods, heat and water stress.
- Damage to monuments from inadequate conservation and uncontrolled urbanisation.
- Security perceptions and uneven destination accessibility.
- Weak coordination among federal, provincial and local institutions.
- Loss of traditional skills when younger generations leave craft communities.
- Over-commercialisation that reduces cultural authenticity.

Strategic recommendations for 2026–2035

- Establish destination-management plans with measurable conservation and tourism targets.
- Prioritise a limited number of internationally marketable cultural and nature circuits.
- Create stronger heritage-financing mechanisms linked to tourism revenue.
- Digitise collections and build a national cultural-heritage data platform.
- Introduce professional certification for guides, adventure operators and heritage interpreters.
- Support community-owned tourism and artisan enterprises.
- Develop international cultural marketing based on authentic regional stories.
- Integrate climate adaptation into all major heritage and tourism investments.

10. CONCLUSION – CULTURE AS A NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT ASSET

Pakistan's tourism, art and culture represent a major strategic asset. The country combines some of Asia's most important archaeological traditions with dramatic mountain landscapes, historic cities, religious heritage, living folk cultures and an increasingly diverse contemporary creative sector.

The central policy challenge is to convert this richness into sustainable value without damaging the heritage that attracts visitors. Tourism should therefore be designed as a conservation and community-development mechanism, while cultural policy should support both preservation and creative economic activity.

Pakistan can strengthen its international cultural profile by connecting heritage conservation, tourism infrastructure, digital technology, arts education, community participation and creative entrepreneurship. The result would not simply be more tourists; it would be stronger local economies, better protection of historic assets, greater international cultural exchange and more opportunities for young people.

Overall assessment

The long-term opportunity is substantial. With coordinated investment and professional destination management, Pakistan can develop a distinctive global tourism identity based on the combination of civilization, mountains, living culture, art, faith, food and creativity. The most successful strategy will place local communities and heritage conservation at the centre of tourism development.

Research basis: UNESCO World Heritage and Intangible Cultural Heritage records; Pakistan Tourism Development Corporation publications and policy information; Pakistan National Commission for UNESCO; National Heritage and Culture Division. Current 2026 information is reflected where available.