**Our tourism potential**

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Pakistan, a culturally and socially diverse country, boasts a civilisation going millennia; the country is host to cultural relics inherited from the knowledge and experience of communities, historians, artists, archaeologists, and anthropologist.

The country’s spiritual heritage is epitomised by the mosques, shrines, temples, churches, gurduwaras, and mandirs that it has preserved over decades. In 2020, the American magazine, Conde Nast Traveler, ranked Pakistan as the number one travel destination for tourism.

Taxila, an ancient city, is a trove of treasures with Buddhist Stupas and archaeological remains. Deep in the Kalasha valleys of Chitral, you can meet the indigenous tribe believed to be descendants of Alexander the Great. Due to this kind of cultural power, the World Economic Forum has placed Pakistan among the top 25 percent of global destinations for its Unesco ‘World Heritage Sites’.

Pakistan’s landscape is unique and varied, with high altitude mountain ranges in the north; a series of low mountain ranges from the north to southwest; plains and deserts in the east; and warm and captivating beaches of the Arabian Sea to the south. With 7,253 known glaciers, Pakistan has more glacial ice than any other country on earth outside the polar regions.

The northern areas of Pakistan meet three spectacular mountain ranges: Karakoram, Hindukush, and the Himalayas. Pakistan has five of the 14 highest independent peaks in the world (the eight thousanders), including K2, Nanga Parbat, Gasherbrum I & II, and Broad Peak. Home to 108 peaks above 7,000 meters and over four thousand peaks above 6,000 meters, an entire series can be devoted to the mountains of Pakistan. Other than the lofty mountains, the north offers cultural heritage, beautiful valleys, natural lakes, glaciers and an array of rare fauna and flora. The polo festival at Shandur Top in Gilgit-Baltistan is an out-of-the-world experience.

Pakistan’s provinces have rich cultural diversity. Karachi, the port city, has landmarks such as Empress Market, the Bristol Hotel, Frere Hall, and the founding father Quaid-e-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah’s Mausoleum. Peshawar is located on the crossroads of Central Asia and South Asia with historic sites, the Qissa Khawani bazaar meriting special mention. Balochistan has breathtaking attractions such as Quetta, nicknamed the ‘fruit garden of Pakistan’, and the Urak Valley, Quaid-e-Azam’s residency in Ziarat, and Pishin Valley. Lush green Kashmir, bestowed with nature’s bounties, is ideal for sporting activities like skiing, paragliding and river rafting. In the north, you can live at the Khaplu Palace like Baltistani royalty. To experience Mughal architecture, a visit to Lahore is a must; the New York Times picked Lahore as one of the top places to visit in 2021.

The British Backpacker Society ranked Pakistan as the number one adventure travel destination for 2018. Will Hatton, author of ‘The Broke Backpacker’, wrote that Pakistani people are “hospitable, kind and welcoming people”. Locals in almost all areas of the country are generous and will invite you to their homes, shopkeepers will ask you to have chai while you are window shopping. Pakistani street food and chai (tea) at makeshift cafes are a world of their own, bustling with resilient and joyful youth. Fragrant, spicy and delectable, many local dishes carry cultural heritage rooted in the history and geography of the country.

In recent years, Pakistan has also seen an incredible improvement in its security situation. The Gallup Law and Order Report of 2021 ranks Pakistan, Italy, Sri Lanka and Israel at the same score of 84, keeping us above many developed countries. The Serbian-based Numbeo Crime Index that ranks 452 cities has improved Karachi’s rank from 13th in 2013, to 127th in 2021 while Islamabad and Lahore are ranked at 396 and 274 respectively – showing that the cities of Pakistan are safer when compared to other major cosmopolitan cities. Pakistan also fares far better in comparison with many advanced economies in Numbeo’s Crime Index 2022.

The hospitality and tourism industry is growing as well. Prime Minister Imran Khan has made promotion of tourism a priority and his determination is yielding positive results. Pakistan’s tourism future is full of hope as the government is aiming to initiate new projects and produce jobs through ongoing efforts and future initiatives to promote tourism.

Pakistan is offering visas on arrival to visitors from over 50 countries and electronic visas to 175 nationalities. In 2017, an estimated 1.7 million foreigners visited Pakistan. The number further grew in the following years, pre-pandemic. The World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) forecast that the country’s tourism sector would grow to over $40 billion within a decade. According to the WTTC, one in four jobs was created by travel and tourism during 2014-2019 in Pakistan. Tourism’s contribution to GDP was 10.4 percent in 2019. Multiple digital resources provide the consumers all the information to plan their trip by aggregating companies and travel agents from across Pakistan onto one platform.

Football lovers will be happy to know that coaches from the Great Britain are coming to Karachi to train Pakistan’s young and rambunctious football fans. And crazy cricket fans have been absolutely thrilled that top cricketers from all over the world were in Pakistan to play in the Pakistan Super League (PSL) matches.

Pakistan is emerging as one of the best travel destinations in the world. It is a great place to enjoy natural beauty and hospitality of its people. In 2017, Cassie De Pescol, the first person to travel to all 196 countries on the planet, after her groundbreaking journey put Pakistan as her fifth favorite country citing that it was one of her most educational and enriching experiences.

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The views expressed are his own.