



Statement
by ECO Secretary General Ambassador Khusrav Noziri
Opening Ceremony of the First ECO Tour Operators Forum
Baku, Azerbaijan, 2 May 2024

Excellency Mr. Fuad Naghiyev, Chairman of the State Tourism Agency of the Republic of Azerbaijan,
Distinguished Delegates from the ECO countries,
Eminent Members of the ECO Tour Operators' Network and Tour Companies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

We extend a cordial welcome to you for joining us at the inaugural ECO Tour Operators Forum, and express our sincere appreciation to the Azerbaijani authorities, particularly the State Tourism Agency, for their steadfast commitment in arranging this event.

The Government of Azerbaijan has made commendable efforts for developing tourism, which is evident in the increasing influx of visitors to this “Land of Fires”. By 2022, tourism numbers and revenue in Azerbaijan and the region began to rebound from the COVID's impact, nearing pre-pandemic levels. In 2022, ECO Member States collectively hosted over 70 million tourists, signaling an 80% improvement. Yet, we are dedicated to furthering regional cooperation to optimize our tourism potential.

Azerbaijan, welcoming over 2 million tourists last year, stands out as a leading tourism destination in our region. Foreseeing continued growth, particularly in light of tourism's significant economic contribution, we anticipate enhanced services and revenue stability. With a robust tourism strategy in place, we aim to surpass the 2019 tourist numbers, leveraging pillars such as governance, regulations, destination management and digital innovation.

We appreciate Azerbaijan's commitment to advancing ECO's tourism objectives. As ECO, we remain dedicated to supporting each Member State's goals in tourism development and will persist in our efforts toward this end.

Dear Participants,

The Economic Cooperation Organization aims to boost economic activities across its 10 member countries through various efforts spanning industries like transport, trade, agriculture, energy and tourism.

With our region's rich cultural and natural assets, including historical silk routes, we own immense tourism potential. The ECO Vision 2025 underscores the significance of the tourism sector, aiming to leverage its economic benefits by enhancing Member States' capacity and cooperation.

Our key objectives in fostering tourism development among ECO Member States include promoting regional destinations, diversifying tourism activities throughout the year and building capacities through knowledge sharing and training.

The ECO Tourism Capitals initiative, launched in 2019, has gained traction, showcasing a designated city's tourism offerings each year. Currently, Shahrizabz in Uzbekistan holds the title, with Erzurum in Türkiye and Shusha in Azerbaijan set to follow the trend in the next two years.

Recently, Shahrizabz was inaugurated as the ECO Tourism Capital for 2024. The occasion was marked by vibrant celebrations. Representatives from ECO member countries enjoyed diverse tourism activities, including folklore festivals, ethno sports, fashion shows, cooking competitions and art exhibitions, as well as tours of historical and natural sites. Additionally, productive discussions were held during events such as the Tourism Forum and Meeting for the Establishment of the ECO Advisory Committee on Tourism.

The Shahrizabz event garnered significant interest from tourism stakeholders, marking a growing tradition for extensive tourism promotion.

Within the envisaged scope, Lahore in Pakistan, Marv in Turkmenistan and Karakol in Kyrgyz Republic have been nominated as ECO Tourism Capital candidates for 2027, signaling a promising future for sustainable tourism development in the region.

Distinguished Delegates,

The ECO Vision 2025 prioritizes increased private sector involvement in ECO tourism, focusing on the creation of tour chains and enhanced connectivity among Member States.

The establishment of the ECO Tour Operators Network in November 2022 aims to foster collaboration among companies across borders to develop joint tours. Through six online meetings and active engagement on social media platforms, tour operators have shared ideas for joint works and forged communication and cooperation.

Furthermore, a proposal to convene a large-scale Forum to further unite tour companies was endorsed by ECO Member States, with support from the State Tourism Agency of Azerbaijan, facilitating the realization of this initiative.

Eminent Delegates,

This ongoing event marks our shared dedication to enhancing economic cooperation and cultural exchange across the ECO region.

The main goal of this Forum is to facilitate the development of collaborative ECO tour packages, utilizing the diverse attractions of our Member States. By gathering tour operators from across the region, we aim to foster knowledge sharing, networking and the creation of innovative tourism products to attract global visitors. Various options will be explored to accommodate the diverse experiences and capabilities of participants, with the ECO Tour Operators' Network playing a key role.

This meeting provides a platform to forge new partnerships, exchange best practices and uncover untapped opportunities in the tourism sector.

Aligned with our Vision 2025, we strive to enhance private sector and community involvement in tourism. To this end, we propose the establishment of the ECO Tourism Agencies Federation, seeking your invaluable inputs.

Together, we can build a more interconnected and competitive tourism industry within the ECO region, fostering economic growth and prosperity for all Member States.

Dear Participants,

In conclusion, I am confident that everyone will actively participate in constructive dialogues, build enduring relationships and embrace our collective aspiration for a thriving and unified ECO community.

Once again, I extend my sincere gratitude to the Azerbaijan State Tourism Agency and its esteemed leadership and team for their gracious hospitality and excellent arrangements.

Let's embark on this promising voyage toward a brighter tourism future in our region, fueled by the expertise of tour operators.

Thank you all.