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REVITALIZING TRADITIONAL RURAL GUESTHOUSE CONCEPT IN AZERBAIJAN FOR COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

Abstract

This study examines the role of rural guesthouses as a model for advancing community-based tourism (CBT) in Azerbaijan, with a particular focus on rural destinations. The study employs a qualitative methodology combining documentary analysis of national tourism strategies and international development reports, field-based observation across northern region, and participatory mapping with community stakeholders. Fieldwork conducted in Guba and Gusar generated empirical evidence on guesthouse practices, community perceptions, and operational realities. Findings reveal persistent challenges including insufficiently qualified human resources, outdated vocational curricula, inadequate facilities, limited digital marketing capacity, high prevalence of unregistered businesses, pronounced seasonality, and weak sectoral coordination. These constraints undermine service quality, visitor satisfaction, and long-term competitiveness of rural tourism destinations. At the same time, opportunities exist to integrate rural guesthouses into Azerbaijan's CBT framework through targeted interventions such as improved training and accreditation, establishment of regional guesthouse associations, development of inclusive booking platforms, financial support schemes, and seasonal diversification strategies.

Keywords: Azerbaijan, rural guesthouses, tourism development, community-based tourism, local communities, sustainable tourism

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Introduction

Azerbaijan's rural regions, ranging from the alpine villages of the Greater Caucasus to the subtropical valleys along the Caspian Sea, possess substantial yet underexploited tourism potential. Traditional guesthouses, once informal pillars of Azerbaijani hospitality, saw a decline as state-run tourism gave way to urban-centric development. By the early 2000s, the majority of international visitors remained in Baku, with the regions "largely underutilized assets" for tourism. (This urban focus, coupled with the absence of structured rural tourism programs, led to a generation in which many village guesthouses faded from use or survived only as unregulated hospitality [4]. The absence of structured rural tourism programs contributed to the decline of village guesthouses, many of

which either fell into disuse or continued operating informally without adequate regulation. In recent years, the significance of community-based tourism (CBT) for rural development has gained increasing recognition in Azerbaijan. CBT emphasizes local ownership, management, and direct benefit sharing, ensuring that host communities actively participate in and profit from tourism growth while preserving their cultural and environmental heritage [16]. From an economic standpoint, rural and regional guesthouses support economic growth and the diversification of local economies [11]. They provide local people, and in particular women, with a new or supplementary livelihood and a source of income that helps alleviate poverty and improve standards of living and quality of life.

Guesthouses increase the opportunity of attracting tourists to stay in a destination, which ultimately leads to further tourist expenditure and additional business for other businesses in the local area [19]. Indeed, empirical evidence indicates that overnight staying visitors spend more on food and drink, entertainment and sightseeing, and transport, than those who do not stay overnight, bringing significant additional benefits to the local economy [5].

This paper addresses that gap by examining the potential to modernize and revive homestays and rural guesthouses as a cornerstone of CBT. The objectives are to analyze historical and current roles of guesthouses, assess challenges to their revival, and propose a framework in which these small-scale accommodations contribute to community empowerment, heritage preservation, and sustainable rural development. The study sets the context of rural tourism in Azerbaijan, reviews global homestay and CBT models, and then integrates theory to craft a localized approach for Azerbaijan's villages. Ultimately, this study establishes the rationale for a community-driven, sustainable approach to rural tourism, aligning with national objectives of economic diversification and post-oil rural revitalization.

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative methodology designed to capture historical trends, policy contexts, and on-the-ground realities of guesthouses in Azerbaijan. The key methodological components are:

Documentary Analysis: Author conducted a systematic review of contemporary policy and planning documents related to tourism and rural development. This included national tourism strategies, regional development plans, NGO project reports, and local tourism publications. Key documents analyzed were recent (2015–2025) tourism development plans, which highlight CBT initiatives, and reports by international organizations (e.g., UNDP, UN Tourism, EU projects). Each document was coded thematically to extract references to guesthouses, rural accommodations, community engagement, and sustainability.

Field-based Observation: Given the study's focus on practical revival of guesthouses, field visits were conducted in several regions of Azerbaijan where community tourism is emerging. The author undertook field-based observations in villages across Guba and Gusar in the northern region. These visits (in summer 2025) involved staying at and visiting existing guesthouses, observing their operations, and informally interacting with hosts and community members.

Participatory Mapping: In two of the field sites a participatory mapping exercise was facilitated with local community members. This involved gathering a small group of residents (including current or potential guesthouse owners, local elders, and youth) to literally map out their village's tourism assets and guesthouse network. Using a large paper map of the area, participants marked locations of existing guesthouses, culturally important sites (e.g., sightseeing places, workshops), and infrastructure (roads, trails). The process was accompanied by discussion, which was recorded and noted, about which areas could be part of a tourism circuit, where additional guesthouses might be viable, and what infrastructure gaps exist (e.g., "we would open a guesthouse here, but the road is bad").

Literature Review

Homestays are broadly defined as a form of accommodation where local families offer rooms in their homes to visitors, facilitating cultural exchange and direct host–guest interaction. Additionally, homestay is typically "a residential house where some rooms are rented out to guests... to learn about the culture of the local community," with the enterprise managed by the family or community [1]. Rural and regional guesthouses support the creation of "visitor hubs" in tourist destinations and can be instrumental in facilitating and maximizing tourism spend in regional areas by turning "day trippers" into overnight staying visitors. They also act as "community hubs" in local areas and provide benefits for local residents, local businesses, and others including access to business and recreational facilities and infrastructure. Rural guesthouses provide

authentic tourism experiences by enabling travelers to engage directly with local culture and daily life. They promote economic

empowerment in rural communities through job creation, entrepreneurship opportunities, and the circulation of income within local supply chains.

Figure 1: Benefits of rural & regional guesthouses



Source: Author's own compilation

Such stays epitomize alternative tourism (Jafari's "adaptancy platform") by providing an authentic, small-scale experience in contrast to mass tourism resorts. Across Asia, Africa, and Latin America, guesthouses have become pillars of CBT and rural economies. They not only generate income but also encourage hosts to preserve traditions from architecture to cuisine as selling points for experience-hungry tourists. Guesthouses also share a common focus on providing travelers with authentic, locally rooted experiences that reflect the culture and lifestyle of the host community. Both guesthouse and homestay type accommodation prioritize personal interaction between guests and hosts. In Thailand, for example, the government formalized homestays through a national standard. Homestays are defined as "an accommodation for experiencing rural culture" run by village cooperatives and certified under the Thai Homestay Standard. This Thai model underscores how institutional support and standards can professionalize homestays [23]. Key success factors in Thailand include strong government support (grants for facility improvements, national marketing) and the establishment of homestay associations that facilitate peer learning and representation. Research by Kontogeorgopoulos et al. (2015) on Thai homestays indicates that when homestay

tourism becomes very successful, it can lead to a degree of commercialization of the rural home – e.g., families restructuring their houses primarily for guests, or cultural performances becoming routinized for tourists [13]. However, the Thai experience also illustrates challenges: many homestays struggled with marketing and relied heavily on government promotions, highlighting that community enterprises often lack access to broader tourism markets [18]. In Nepal, homestays have been heralded as a rural development tool since the late 1990s. The village of Sirubari, established in 1997 as the country's first homestay cluster, is often cited as a success – a community-managed model with over two dozen homes hosting tourists. Aside from Sirubari, other Nepali villages like Ghalegaon and Nagarkot have successfully launched homestay programs. These are often facilitated by village tourism committees. A notable aspect in Nepal is the integration of participatory decision-making, villagers collectively decide pricing, allocate guests among households, and rotate benefits. The result has been not only economic gains but also strengthened community cohesion and pride in local culture [3]. Sirubari's model, now replicated widely, intertwines tourism with cultural heritage: visitors live with Gurung families, partake in traditional music and

farming activities, and thus incentivize the community to maintain its cultural landscape. Similar patterns are seen in Vietnam, where ethnic minority villages in areas like Sa Pa and Mai Ch  u have developed homestays as social enterprises [14]. The Da Bac CBT initiative is one example where an NGO helped villagers set up homestays and trained them in hospitality and English skills [15]. These international cases demonstrate that homestays can thrive under varying conditions whether grassroots-led (Nepal), government-supported (Thailand), or NGO-facilitated (Vietnam) but all require community buy-in, training, and market access to succeed.

Communities with higher social capital are theorized to organize and manage collective endeavors (like a network) more effectively. This is particularly relevant for Azerbaijan's tight-knit rural communities, where kinship and neighborhood ties can be leveraged for collective action in tourism (e.g., rotating guests among families, or pooling resources for marketing). The framework hypothesizes that strengthening social capital (through participatory planning processes, for instance) will enhance the success of guesthouse initiatives – a view supported by previous studies linking community cohesion to tourism resilience [9]. CBT is rooted in the idea of tourism planned, owned, and managed by the community for its own benefit [17]. Key principles in CBT models include community empowerment, participation in decision-making, cultural and environmental sustainability, and equitable income distribution [6]. The literature often contrasts CBT with conventional tourism: while mass tourism can lead to economic leakage and cultural commodification, CBT aims to retain profits locally and strengthen host culture. Sustainable tourism models such as the Triple Bottom Line (economic, social, environmental goals) and ecotourism frameworks overlap with CBT by promoting long-term viability and local stewardship [7]. CBT theory has evolved to stress not just community participation but community leadership moving from the token involvement of locals to genuine control. The

concept of community empowerment in tourism is frequently cited: successful CBT yields economic empowerment (improved livelihoods), psychological empowerment (community pride), social empowerment (strengthened networks), and political empowerment (greater say in development) [20].

Former Soviet Union countries, including those in the Caucasus and Central Asia, present a unique context. Schmid et al. (2022) note that in the Caucasus, these guesthouses are typically family-run, often led by women, and blend traditional hospitality with commercial services [21]. Research on Georgian guesthouses suggests that while they benefited rural economies, issues like lack of training, variable service standards, and absence of regulation were common in the early years [10]. In Georgia's highlands, guesthouse owners formed local associations to coordinate marketing and represent their interests to authorities [12]. Another is managing authenticity: Georgian hospitality is famed, and integrating those traditions into guesthouse operations became a marketing advantage [8]. Over time, some countries established associations or standards (the Kyrgyz CBT Association is often cited as a regional best practice, creating a network of guesthouses with quality guidelines) [2].

Findings and Analysis

Today, Azerbaijan stands at a turning point where rural guesthouses are gaining recognition as a tourism development tool. Government and agency-led programs since around 2018 have started to systematically support rural guesthouse establishment. One flagship effort is the project "Development of entrepreneurship and self-employment in villages" launched in 2021 by a coalition of the Small and Medium Business Development Agency (KOBIA), the State Employment Agency, and the State Tourism Agency. Under this program, villagers could apply to receive support to set up guesthouses. In its first phase, 15 village guesthouses were provided with an inventory of furnishings and training for the owners. By 2023, the project expanded, with 65

rural guesthouses created across different regions through two phases. These guesthouses were selected based on criteria such as being located along a tourist route, the house having basic suitable conditions, and the owner being unemployed (to target those who need livelihood support). Trainees underwent courses on hospitality, business planning, hygiene, and even social media marketing [22].

During participatory mapping fieldwork, various challenges were identified.

Challenge 1: Inadequate Workforce Qualifications: Guesthouse owners frequently fail to meet or surpass established quality benchmarks, leading to poor decision-making in key areas such as kitchen sanitation, food preparation, cleaning services, furniture upkeep, bedding maintenance, and guest interactions.

Challenge 2: Substandard Hospitality Education Programs: Tourism and hospitality programs in Azerbaijan's regional institutions lag behind global best practices in both curriculum design and instructional methods. There is a notable shortage of specialized courses focused on guesthouse management.

Challenge 3: Poor standard of facilities: Across Azerbaijan's regions, guesthouses commonly feature outdated and neglected furniture and appliances. Priorities for improvement include replacing or repairing

dining room chairs and tables, kitchen cooking tools, and storage units, as well as lobby cabinets.

Challenge 4. Limited resources and market access: Rural and regional guesthouses often struggle with limited knowledge, resources, and support to reach markets and attract enough guests to sustain their businesses. Many operators rely on additional sources of livelihood just to cover basic living expenses.

Challenge 5. High prevalence of informal businesses: Most guesthouses in regional Azerbaijan remain unregistered, reflecting a broader trend across the informal economy. While avoiding registration may seem to save costs on taxes, compliance, and fees, it significantly restricts opportunities for growth.

Challenge 6. Tourism seasonality: Tourism demand in regional Azerbaijan is highly seasonal, with most visits concentrated in a few peak months. Guesthouses often close for the rest of the year, reducing income and forcing staff layoffs creating additional recruitment and training costs when the season restarts.

Challenge 7. Weak sector coordination and cooperation: The guesthouse sector in Azerbaijan suffers from limited coordination and collaboration. Government bodies must engage operators individually, while operators themselves lack a collective platform to voice concerns, share knowledge, or advocate for supportive policies.

Challenge		Solution
Category	Issue	
Standards	<i>Poor condition of facilities</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Targeted grants programme (STA, KOBIA, SEA, etc.) • Loans awareness raising and application support (Banks, KOBIA, ATB) • Capacity building on guest needs, importance of maintenance, integration into business management
	<i>Limited understanding of standards</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regional tourism quality label (Guesthouse Quality Label) • Awareness raising campaign on new standards • Appointing tutors to guide operators
	<i>Unawareness of changing consumer expectations</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Customer feedback training & provision of tools • Conduct regular destination-level visitors surveys • Deliver workshops on adapting services to new markets

Sales, marketing & promotions	<i>Not part of digital economy</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inclusive booking platform for regional guesthouses Train operators on social media marketing (SMM) Provide access to affordable technology support Create Grants & Loans Schemes
	<i>Seasonality</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Capacity building (“How to increase your visitors during the low season” training) Off-season promotions and support mechanisms
	<i>Limited access to market</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure inclusion of guesthouses in national and regional digital / print listings “Brochure Stimulation Programme” Participation in national and regional tourism trade fairs
Human resources	<i>Limited number of qualified staff</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Certified short courses for operators and staff Establish annual “Tourism Futures (Careers) Day” Grants for guesthouse staff to access vocational training Capacity building relating to human resources management
	<i>Limited relevant vocational training & poor standards</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Guesthouse Management” specialty for vocational schools “ToT” for trainers of hospitality courses in regional vocational schools Link guesthouses with internship programmes for students
Governance	<i>Insufficient quality information for sector development</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Government regional tourism online database (whole of sector with accommodation section) Annual regional destination survey and report (whole of sector with accommodation section)
	<i>Lack of co-ordination, co-operation, and communication</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish dedicated working groups for accommodation and guesthouses Establish a Guesthouse Association Establish Regional Tourism Networks, host monthly networking events, later evolve into formal clusters

Recommendations

Drawing from the findings and discussion, several policy and strategic recommendations emerge to ensure the successful revitalization of rural guesthouses as a foundation for community-based tourism in Azerbaijan. These recommendations are aimed at government agencies (tourism, economy, education), local authorities, and community organizations, as well as potential private sector and NGO partners:

1) A structured Guesthouse Operator Training and Certification Program is needed to standardize quality and empower hosts. Delivered through regional tourism centers or vocational schools, it should cover hospitality

basics (hygiene, service, cooking, sanitation), business skills (accounting, marketing, English, booking platforms), and sustainability (waste, energy, cultural protocol). Government could subsidize and make training mandatory for participation in official promotion campaigns. Advanced modules (e.g., guiding, first aid) can further upgrade host skills.

2) Regional Guesthouse Cooperatives / Networks should be established to unify local operators for collective marketing, standard-setting, and fair distribution of guests and income. Examples like Nepal’s homestay rotation systems and Georgian guesthouse associations show how cooperation boosts visibility and equity. In Azerbaijan, such

networks (e.g., “Guba Guesthouse Association”) could also serve as a single voice with government for infrastructure and training support. Policies may encourage their formation through grants or legal assistance.

3) Government and Private Sector Incentives can accelerate rural guesthouse growth. Government support may include micro-grants or low-interest loans (e.g., up to \$5,000 for upgrades), tax exemptions or property tax relief, tied to training completion and long-term operation. Private sector involvement could come through partnerships where tour operators include certified guesthouses in packages, supported by recognition or subsidies. Additional incentives like annual awards (e.g., “Best Guesthouse in Azerbaijan”) with prize money and media exposure can further motivate hosts to improve quality and innovate.

4) Digital Transformation for Guesthouses requires both capacity-building and infrastructure. Operators (or local youth) should be trained in digital literacy (using booking sites, social media, and managing reviews) possibly through workshops with tech partners or NGOs. Reliable internet access in each target village is essential. A centralized Azerbaijani CBT web portal could showcase guesthouses by region with photos, multilingual descriptions, booking contacts, and tourist feedback, serving as an official, credible marketplace to boost visibility and marketing.

5) Integrating Guesthouses into National Tourism Routes and Marketing will help position them as a core tourism product, not just a niche. Guesthouses should be included in themed routes (e.g., a “Northern Mountains Cultural Tour” combining Shahdag with village stays) and promoted through tour packages that mix major sights with community experiences. International travel fairs, media campaigns, and hosted trips for journalists / bloggers can raise global visibility, while domestic tourism should be encouraged through weekend promotions, student / youth programs, and “community tourism days.” Government marketing subsidies can further support CBT exposure in both domestic and international markets.

6) Public-Private Partnerships for Infrastructure are essential to address major rural tourism barriers like roads, signage, and utilities. Critical gaps in CBT hotspots should be mapped and prioritized in regional budgets, for example, upgrading access roads or water supply in villages with strong tourism potential. Partnerships between government and private actors can ensure investments are targeted, sustainable, and aligned with community tourism growth.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that revitalizing rural guesthouses is a pivotal strategy for strengthening community-based tourism in Azerbaijan. While challenges such as outdated skills, limited-service quality, weak infrastructure, and informal operations have constrained their growth, guesthouses also represent one of the most promising pathways for diversifying tourism, supporting rural livelihoods, and making tourism more inclusive. Their authenticity and close ties to community life set them apart from large-scale hotels, offering travelers meaningful cultural immersion, direct interaction with hosts, and opportunities to experience local traditions, qualities that align with global demand for experiential and sustainable tourism. The research further highlights that guesthouse success relies not only on individual entrepreneurship but also on collective organization and supportive policy frameworks. Cooperative networks, digital platforms, and targeted training or financial programs can enhance both visibility and viability, while ensuring fair distribution of benefits within communities. When embedded into regional tourism circuits, guesthouses can extend visitor stays, increase spending, and stimulate local industries such as food production, handicrafts, and guiding services. In conclusion, revitalizing guesthouses goes beyond preserving traditional hospitality, it involves transforming them into structured, professionalized, and market-ready enterprises. With capacity-building, certification, digital integration, and tailored incentives, guesthouses can evolve into strategic drivers of sustainable tourism, rural

development, and community empowerment in Azerbaijan.

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AZƏRBAYCANDA İCMA-ƏSASLI TURİZMİN İNKİŞAFI ÜÇÜN ƏNƏNƏVİ KƏND QONAQ EVLƏRİ KONSEPTİNİN TƏŞVİQİ

Xülasə

Bu tədqiqat Azərbaycanda kənd turizmin inkişaf etdiyi destinasiyalara fokuslanaraq icma-əsaslı turizmin təşviqində kənd qonaq evlərinin rolunu araşdırır. Tədqiqat çərcivəsində milli turizm strategiyaları və beynəlxalq turizm inkişaf hesabatlarının təhlili, Şimal bölgəsinə sahə səfərləri, həmçinin icma nümayəndələri ilə görüşlər və fikir mübadiləsi daxil olan keyfiyyət metodologiyası tətbiq edilmişdir. Quba və Qusar rayonlarında aparılan sahə tədqiqatları kənd qonaq evlərinin cari vəziyyəti və yerli icmanın bu sahədə üzləşdiyi çətinliklərə dair empirik məlumatlar təqdim etmişdir. Nəticələr göstərir ki, bu sektor bir sıra davamlı çətinliklərlə üzləşir: ixtisaslı insan resurslarının çatışmazlığı, köhnəlmış peşə tədris proqramları, qeyri-kafi infrastruktur, məhdud rəqəmsal marketinq imkanları, qeydiyyatsız fəaliyyət göstərən kənd qonaq evlər, mövsumlülük problemi və zəif sektoral koordinasiya. Aydınlaşdır ki, bu məhdudiyyətlər xidmət keyfiyyətinə, ziyarətçi məmənuniyyətinə və kənd turizmi destinasiyalarının uzunmüddətli rəqabət qabiliyyətinə mənfi təsir göstərir. Eyni zamanda, kənd qonaq evlərinin Azərbaycanın icma-əsaslı turizm konsepsiyasına integrasiyası üçün imkanlar da mövcuddur. Bunlara təkmilləşdirilmiş təlim və akkreditasiya, regional qonaq evi assosiasiyanın yaradılması, inklüziv rezervasiya platformalarının inkişafı, maliyyə ilə bağlı dəstək mexanizmləri və mövsumlülünün azaldılması strategiyaları daxildir. Bu məqalə mövcud resursları araşdırmaq və inkişaf istiqamətlərini təklif etməklə Azərbaycanda davamlı və inklüziv icma-əsaslı turizm təşəbbüslerinin inkişafına töhfə vermək məqsədi daşıyır.

Açar sözlər: Azərbaycan, kənd qonaq evləri, turizmin inkişafı, icma-əsaslı turizm, yerli icmalar, dayanıqlı turizm

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ВОЗРОЖДЕНИЕ ТРАДИЦИОННОЙ КОНЦЕПЦИИ ДЕРЕВЕНСКИХ ГОСТЕВЫХ ДОМОВ В АЗЕРБАЙДЖАНЕ ДЛЯ РАЗВИТИЯ ТУРИЗМА НА ОСНОВЕ СООБЩЕСТВ

Резюме:

Данное исследование рассматривает роль сельских гостевых домов как модели для продвижения туризма на основе сообществ в Азербайджане, с особым акцентом на сельские туристические направления. В исследовании использовалась качественная методология, включающая документальный анализ национальных туристических стратегий и международных отчетов по развитию, полевые наблюдения в северных регионах и участие представителей сообществ в процессе картирования. Полевые исследования, проведенные в районах Губа и Гусар, предоставили эмпирические данные о практиках гостевых домов, восприятии сообществ и операционных реалиях.

Результаты выявили ряд устойчивых проблем, включая недостаточную квалификацию персонала, устаревшие профессиональные учебные программы, недостаточную инфраструктуру, ограниченные возможности цифрового маркетинга, высокую долю незарегистрированных предприятий, выраженную сезонность и слабую координацию между секторами. Эти ограничения негативно влияют на качество обслуживания, удовлетворенность посетителей и долгосрочную конкурентоспособность сельских туристических направлений. В то же время существуют возможности для интеграции сельских гостевых домов в рамки СВТ Азербайджана через целенаправленные меры, такие как улучшение подготовки и аккредитации, создание региональных ассоциаций гостевых домов, разработка инклюзивных платформ бронирования, финансовые поддерживающие механизмы и стратегии сезонной диверсификации.

Ключевые слова: Азербайджан, сельские гостевые дома, развитие туризма, туризм на основе сообществ, местные сообщества, устойчивый туризм

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