

ACTIVATING HERITAGE TOURISM IN AKRE CITY BY APPLYING SUSTAINABLE ECOTOURISM APPROACHES

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Abstract

Kurdistan Region has almost integrated tourism elements. It is one of the few areas that have diverse aspects of tourism, cultural combination and natural resources. Akre city is a mountainous city in North Iraq/ Kurdistan it is related administratively to Duhok governorate. Akre is a good example of various types of tourism such as natural, cultural, historic, treatment and eco-tourism; as well as its distinguished character in design and buildings. Through the last two decades the city faced neglect in preserving its heritage specially, and its construction generally. This research is a study of Akre city from touristic aspect, trying to highlight the most important features in the city heritage in order to activate the heritage touristic activity as a major contributor to cultural, economic, and social activities of the city. The research will study the existing situation, and apply sustainable approaches by promoting heritage tourism as an attractive economic revitalization strategy, and one of the important means to develop historical, religious, and cultural tourism.

Research Problem

Lack of a clear planning vision and strategy for activating the heritage Tourism in Akre city.

Research Questions

What are the main aspects for tourism in Akre?

What are the positives and negatives of promoting Heritage Tourism in Akre?

What are the best steps to activate a heritage tourism plan in the city?

Research Hypothesis

Activating a heritage planning strategy in Akre city will lead to high touristic outcomes in Akre.

Research Methodology

The research will use the following methods in study:

Descriptive Analysis of data related to Heritage of Akre.

Statistical Data Collection & Analysis

SWOT Analysis of Current situation.

In-depth Interview & Questioner of beneficiaries.

Introduction

Heritage is the full range of our inherited traditions, monuments, objects, and culture. Most important, it is the range of contemporary activities, meanings, and behaviors that we

draw from them.(2) Heritage is an essential part of the present we live in—and of the future we will build. Heritage Tourism contributes to both preserving and activating heritage areas by emphasizing their importance to both present and future generations as well as visiting tourists. Today, there is no serious and ambitious country that does not prefer development of tourism in its development strategies as a planetary phenomenon and development sector, especially when there are historical and heritage areas within the country such as Akre city.

Akre city, Location and Historical background:

Akre (Kurdish Akre, ناکری); is a city and district in north Iraq. It is located in Dohuk Governorate. Before 1991 Akre was administratively affiliated to the province of Nineveh, but after the 1991 uprising, Akre became officially within the areas of the Kurdistan region. The total area of the district is (1134) km². It was formed in 1877 by the Ottoman Empire and the city of Akre became the center of the district. Akre district is the center of three sub-districts, (Dinarta, Kirdasin, and Bejail) with estimated population of 150,000 people (1). Fig.(1)

Akre is located north of latitude 37.4 and east longitude 44.8, height of 665m above sea level. Akre is about 110km south west of Erbil, 100km to the east of center Duhok and 90 km north of center Mosul, Ninewa. The Zab River borders the city from north, Amedi Qadha and Shaqlawa Qadha from east, Hamdania Qadha in Mosul to the south, the river Khazarand Shaykhan Qadha to the west. Akre is considered as one of the ancient cities in history, dating back to the Cretaceous period, the era of the early appearance of villages and towns. It is believed that Akre emerged about (700 BC) as a settlement, created by (Prince Zeid) who named it (Akre; 1742) related to the Zoroastrians and the name is derived from the Kurdish



word ناکری which means fire.

Fig (1) Akre location in Iraq and Duhok. Source: Akre Master Plan

Tourism and Heritage Potentials:

Kurdistan Region has almost integrated tourism elements. It is one of the few areas that have diverse aspects of tourism, cultural combination and natural resources. Akre is a good example for various types of tourism. Akre city mixes in its contents the heritage, religious sites as well as natural sites which makes the city a good attraction for tourism.

Religious sites: related to many holy sites visited by people such as;

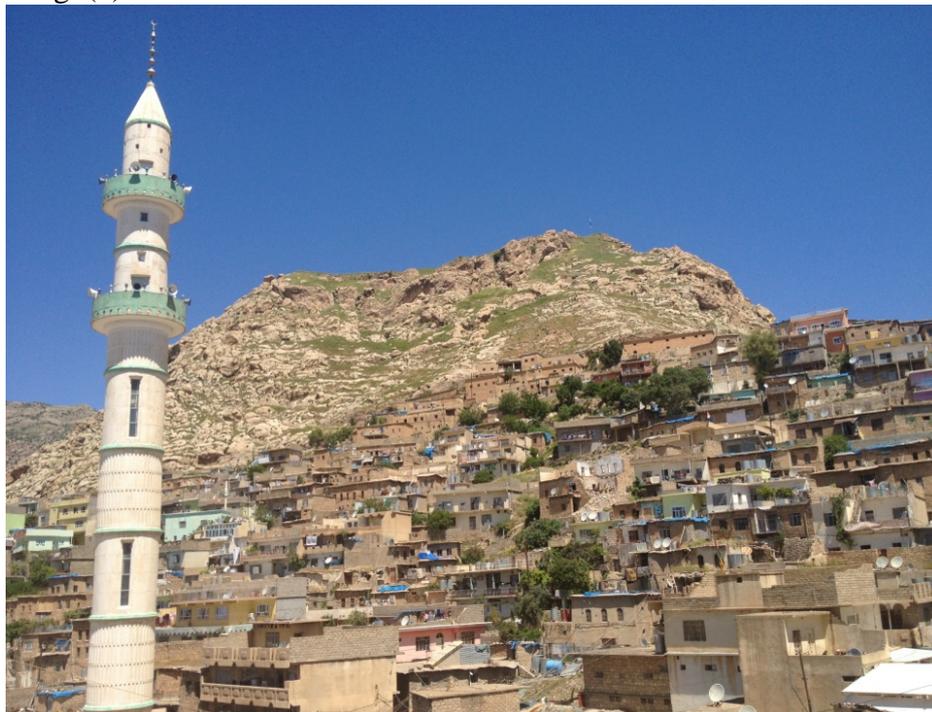
Sheikh Abdul Aziz al-Kilani, Sheikh Ismail Aluliani, Sheikh Ahmed, Sheikh Mohammed, Sheikh BadiSurja, Sheikhs Kula Ka, and Sheikh Abdul Qader al-Kilani. Fig.(2)

Natural sites: With beautiful waterfalls such as; Seiba water fall, KaniZark, KaliZanta resort, AlBajeel resort , and Dinarte. The mountain ranges in the north (Akre Mountains and Bashkal Mountains) theses with the valleysconstitute the natural potential”. (3: P25)



Fig. (2) Akre Townscape. Source: Researcher

Cultural sites: Akre possess excellent cultural features for developing tourism such as: “The structurally well preserved old city center on the southern slope of the castle hill (kalaAkre) as well as the exciting historical sites and religious locations constitute the cultural potential of the city. Cultural tourism is a complex of numerous activities that enables not only the affirmation of cultural-historic motives, but also provides important resources for renewal of cultural-historic monuments, tangible and intangible heritage and resources. (2) Akre has a wonderful old city, the topography of the city create very nice townscape of terraces houses with narrow streets, mosques, bazaar and traditional shops: See Fig. (3) and Fig. (4).





Akre Old city Fig.(3) Fig. (4). Source: Researcher

Tourism and sustainability:

There are a many definitions for Sustainable Tourism, including eco-tourism, green travel, environmentally and culturally responsible tourism, fair trade and ethical travel.

The most widely accepted definition is that of the World Tourism Organization. They define sustainable tourism as “tourism which leads to management of all resources in such a way that economic, social and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity and life support systems.”

In addition they describe the development of sustainable tourism as a process which meets the needs of present tourists and host communities whilst protecting and enhancing needs in the future (World Tourism Organization 1996).

The World Heritage Sustainable Tourism Program:

The World Heritage Sustainable Tourism Program encourages sustainable tourism actions at World Heritage sites. The Program develops policies and processes for site management and for the state parties to the Convention to address this increasingly important management concern. It implements actions to preserve sites for future generations and contributes to sustainable development and intercultural dialogue. It focuses on seven activities:

1. Building the capacity of World Heritage site management to deal with tourism.
2. Training local community members in environment and culture preservation and tourism related activities to receive tourism's benefits.
3. Aiding communities around the sites to market their products and use the World Heritage sites as a lever for local economic social and cultural development.
4. Raising public awareness of World Heritage Outstanding Universal Values and building pride and intercultural dialogue with local communities and visitors through conservation education.
5. Using tourism generated funds to supplement site conservation and protection costs.
6. Spreading the lessons learned to other sites and protected areas.

7. Building increased awareness of the objectives of the 1972 World Heritage Convention and other UNESCO conventions to the Tourism Programs activities and policies for local and national public tourism authorities, tourism industry officials and tourists. (5)

Akre city is a city that consists a variety of touristic aspects such as; cultural, natural and religious tourism. In order to deal with these aspects, a holistic integrated planning model could be implemented to manage the different issues in the city in a sustainable planning strategy.

4. Eco tourism approach and its application:

Ecotourism is a concept that evolved in the past 20 years as the conservation community, people living in and around protected areas, and the travel industry witnessed a boom in nature tourism and realized their mutual interests in directing its growth (6:P2). It provides opportunities for visitors to experience powerful manifestations of nature and culture and to learn about the importance of biodiversity conservation and local cultures. At the same time, ecotourism generates income for conservation and economic benefits for communities living in rural or remote areas(7). The attributes of ecotourism make it a valuable tool for conservation.

5.The current situation of tourism Akre city:

The research will study Akre city from touristic aspects, starting from the Master plan of the city, and the Municipality steps in this aspect, in order to evaluate the current plans for the city setting the main potentials and limitations that affect the futurestrategy for cultural tourism planning of Akre city.

Akre Master plan 2010-2033/ Ingenierburo–Vossing:

The Master plan emphasized the need of urban development for Akre city and particularly to the old town and suburban outskirts. The population in Akre developed very irregularly. Fig. (5) shows steady growth in 1977-1978, disproportionate growth in1987-1996 with average annual growth of 12%. In 1997-2007 growth slowed to3.6%, and from 2007 on a renewed increase to 94pprox.16%(MUN 2009).This is due to high birth rates and immigration from rural to urban areas, as well as from other parts of Iraq to Akre, as expected by the city administration. The population of Akre city is (56000) inhabitants in 2009. (3: p19).

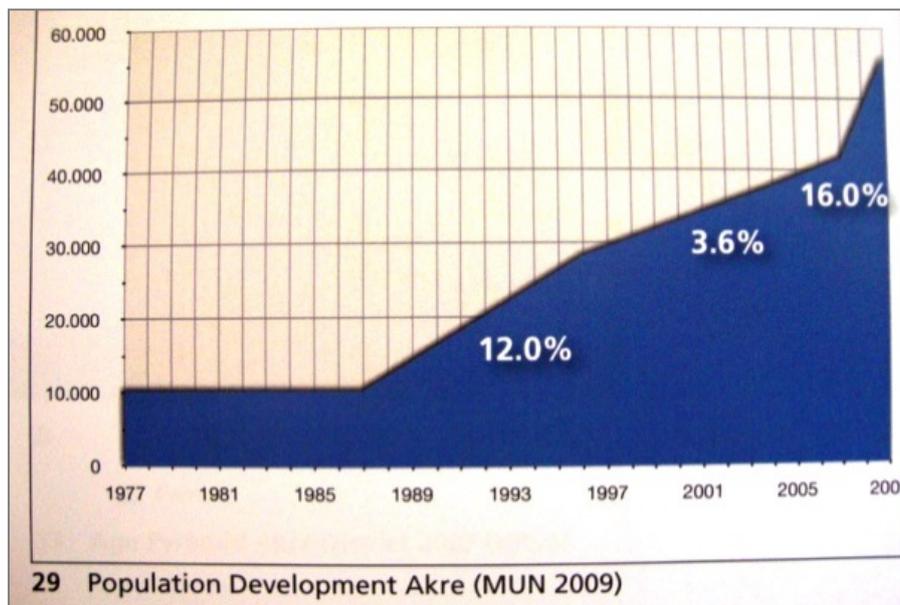


Fig. (5) shows population growth rate. Source: Akre Master Plan (P.29)

The Master plan emphasizes the tourism importance economically to Akre city ; however it doesn't refer to a certain strategy or plan for achieving it.: "Interesting tourism offers can increase the overall value of the residential, work,and investment location of Akre and thus its attractiveness. In turn, all sectors of the city can benefit from this." Investments to be at:

Increase in number of beds

Increase in the quality of hotels

Preservation and development of historical sites in and around Akre

Creation of opportunities for recreation

Improvement of cleanness of city and countryside. (3: p24)

There are uncertainties in the statistics related to tourism in Akre. The Office of preservation of historic monuments and tourism of Duhok states that in the 1st half of 2007, 177000 tourists spent the night in Duhok governorate(62%) kurds (16%) foreigners with approximately 200 tourists for overnight stays). A very small share for Akre city. While the tourist office in Akre gives different data, as 2500 tourist per week in 2008 (2000 from outside Kurdistan, 500 from Kurdistan). This will amount to 130000 tourists for the year, which means the number of Akre tourists is higher than Duhokcity. (Ibid, P25)

Current situation of tourism infrastructure in Akre:

The only hotel in Akre (Sipa Hotel) has the lowest comfort standards with 28 rooms

Few parking spaces at the outskirts of old city occupied mostly by residents

No information system related to tourism

Lack of suitable restaurants, a part from those at Sepa waterfall. The restaurants in new Akre can't take this function and are hardly attractive.

Need for repair and renovation for historical buildings.

Low standards of cleanness and hygiene area surrounding touristic sites.

Local Municipality reports and actions:

The municipality succeeded in putting Akre in the Fifth year Touristic plan map of Kurdistan region as a city with special historical, touristic and religious characteristics. This includes: (Interview with Qaimmakam Akre,J. Ali Aziz)

An urgent plan for restoring the Chapel and Abdul Aziz Takya in old city

A yearly grant for 250000000 ID for the old city heritage rehabilitation.(as explained above)

Future natural tourism (Bakurman, Karesh, Kalezanta).

According to an interview with Akre Municipality officer " K. K. Abdulrahman", The municipality is working on a project of old Akre city renewal after forming a committee of members of municipality, heritage and agriculture. The plan consists of :

Short term plan: Conservation of old district

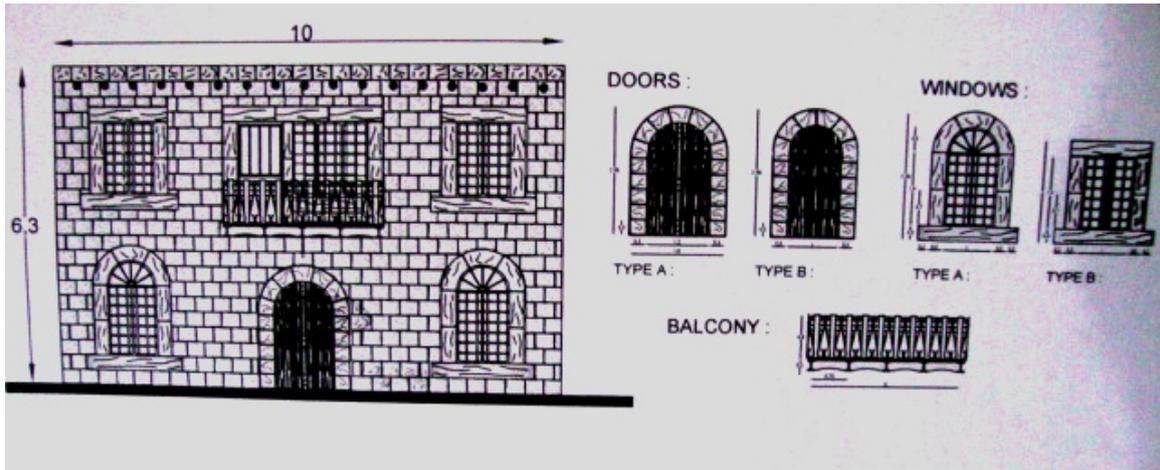
Long term plan: Rehabilitation and Revitalization of houses that were affected and damaged by residents.

Akre municipality is working on a project for the conservation of the architectural heritage style of old Akre as follows:

Giving building license to citizens who want to build or repair their old building according to certain conditions..

The person is given a financial support of 150000 ID/ m2 for stone covering of elevations, depending on the size of elevation.

A committee for supervision consists of(engineer, surveyor,accountant, law specialist, representative from heritage directorate) according to the order (3476) in 24/11/2010. See fig.(6) below for the suggested sizes, heights for elevation, doors, windows.



Challenges of Tourism in Akre:

According to the current situation of Akre city, Cultural heritage Tourism in Akre faces many challenges that must be addressed in order to build effective tourism strategies. These are:

Non long –term strategy with specific features for the development of tourism, cultural, natural, religious activities.(8: p5)

Limited financial resources allocated by the government for the activity

Poor infrastructure (roads, and fast transportation, hotels, and associated entertainment services) especially in tourist attraction area in addition to the retardation of banking services according to the international standards.

Absence of expertise to determine the needs and limited vocational centers for training alternative personnel

Limited private investment companies and corporations in the field of tourism

Poor database available on tourism, heritage, and cultural activities. See Figs. (7), (8)





Fig. (7) and Fig. (8) show the poor condition of houses and services in old Akre.
Source: Researcher

SWOT Analysis of the Tourism situation of Akre city:

The analysis of the situation of Akre city could help in defining the city's distinctive strengths in its present status and in predicting basic development weaknesses in its internal environment. Furthermore, this analysis creates the ability to stress potential development opportunities for cultural tourism and identify the threats from the external environment of the organization that are related to issues of its development, long-lasting viability and effective operation. Table 1 shows the analysis of the city's internal and external environment that defines its present status (2010-2013), and the difficulties of its development.

Strengths 2. Weaknesses } Internal environment
Opportunities 3. Threats } External Environment

Table 1.
SWOT Analysis of Akre Tourism aspects

Strengths

- Relative proximity to Duhok
- Uniqueness of the city, naturally and culturally
- Prominence of the social history of Akre and the natural potentials
- Willingness and support of local administrative for future:
- Dynamic website
- Development of Master plan for Akre
- Natural, cultural and religious tourism potentials in Akre
- Limited Real Estate Loans to people for rebuilding historical damaged houses

Weaknesses

- Uncertain data and statistics number of visitors
- Uncertainties concerning the budgeting and finance
- Lack of tourism industry idea!
- Lack investment opportunities
- Low awareness of tourism among citizens
- Lack of significant actions to promote the city
- Inefficient cooperation between local factors
- Lack of autonomous/private resources
- Lack of a common vision from the local society for the city tourism development
- Lack of a enough infrastructure and uperstructure facilities for tourism such as; roads, communications, hotels, motels, recreation activities
- Lack of good information system for tourists (signposts, markers)

Opportunity

- a stable security in Kurdistan region
- KRG Policy to Encouraging international and local investors and businesses to invest in tourism sector in Kurdistan Region (new KRG Investment Low in Kurdistan)
- Enrichment of the city with exhibits from organizations inside and outside the region
- Strategic Project to improve the regional Infrastructure

Threats

- Long distance from other areas in region
- Lack of strategic planning in tourism development
- Not being incorporated enough in tourist packages of the wider area
- Low government subsidies
- Deterioration of heritage areas due to natural and negligence factors.
- Invasion of new architectural styles that doesn't relate to heritage areas.

See figure (9) for the most distinguished areas in old city of Akre.as strengths.



44 Old Synagogue



45 Sheikh Mave cave



47 Meriem Church



43 Grave Sheikh Abdul Aziz



46 Grand Mosque



48 Detail from the historic town

Fig. (9) shows some of the important heritage areas in Akre old city. Source: Akre Master Plan(p29)

In order to overcome the different challenges affecting an integrated sustainable ecotourism in Akre city a suggested vision and strategy was formed as follows:

The Vision:

- Developing and reconstructing the cultural and historical heritage as an essential element in the development of Akre Tourism.
- Continuing assumption of an advanced position within the cultural and historical heritage of the world
- Increase tourism contribution to GDP.

The Suggested Sustainable Eco tourism planning strategy :

An integrated approach is needed both in tourism planning and sustainable management. This could be applied by:

- Integrated tourism planning within and outside Akre city.
- Good governance of Tourism
- Development of effective administrative institutions, including the strengthening of decentralized environmental administration
- Creating an operational model for making the cultural, historic and architectural heritage of Akre city and its surroundings active and utilized for cultural tourism within the total economic development of the city.
- Adopting principles and criteria of sustainable integrative protection of Akre through proper utilization and management,
- Improving the authentic and recognizable identity of Akre, to be of prestigious and competitive attraction to tourists, by promoting the values and particularities of the old heritage city.
- Involvement and participation of Stakeholders and especially collaboration between the private sector, local communities and the site management authority in relation to planning for sustainable tourism.
- Improving the infrastructure of tourism and culture
- Establishing Information system
- Improving public awareness on the importance of tourism economically.
- Increasing the Media role in promoting Akre city as touristic city.

Recommendations and Actions

Activating an integrated Sustainable Eco Tourism Strategy approach in Akre city in:

Economic dimension: Real estate loans, investments

Social dimension: Public Awareness through Media

Environmental dimension: Conservation of natural sites

Establishing scientific and academic relations between Akre administrative and Academia.

Establishing joint cooperation between local organizations (Municipality, Physical Planning directorate, tourism agencies) and architectural department in Duhok university to support joint research and projects.

Starting detailed documentation and field surveys and studies of the historical part of Akre city in joint team works between Duhok/ and Akre administrative organizations.

The City Code in Akre should set out a long term vision for the Old City based on regeneration to create an internationally recognized heritage with historic urban building and houses in good condition.

Establishing a digitized Data system including all documents, maps data collection regarding historical, religious, natural aspects in Akre.

Communicating the significant culture value of Akre for inhabitants and tourists through:

Organizing creative events in the historic and culture places to make it visible and mirroring the culture value

Offering professional tour guides for the inhabitants and tourists

Integrating community Facilities (Cafes, art galleries, etc)

Improving the pedestrian access for connecting the green corridor from historic city center to the water fall .

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