

Exploring AIUla: Rural Tourism Planning in UNWTO's Best Tourism Village 2022

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ABSTRACT: Rural tourism, with a focus on nature and nature-based attractions in rural landscape has been in race in the service industry since 1800's in various forms, transforming rural lives. Of late many countries has been in the forerun for revitalizing their rural areas through rural tourism to transform and uplift their rural regions. Rural tourism, characterized by its focus on natural landscapes, cultural heritage, and authentic local experiences, has emerged as a significant segment within the global tourism industry, offering travellers an alternative to traditional urban destinations. This article delves into the intricate landscape of rural tourism planning through a focused exploration of AIUla, Saudi Arabia, crowned as the UNWTO's Best Tourism Village in 2022. Drawing on a synthesis of academic literature, governmental reports, and various news articles, the article examines the multifaceted strategies employed in AIUla's rural tourism planning, exploring the economic, socio-cultural, and environmental realms of rural tourism.

KEYWORDS: Rural tourism planning, AIUla, economic dimension, socio cultural dimension, environmental dimension, sustainability

I. INTRODUCTION

The term rural is perceived differently in different parts of the world, depending on the regional economic differences, between developed and developing countries etc. [1] On a very basic level, rural areas are those geographical regions which are outside the boundaries of an urban centre. Rural settings are typically characterized by scattered small settlements and farms spread across extensive areas, predominantly consisting of agricultural land and forests.

[2] UNWTO understands Rural Tourism as range of products generally linked to nature-based activities, agriculture, rural lifestyle / culture, angling and sightseeing.[3] Urbanization is a

prevalent trend across the world and by 2050 it is estimated that though 68% of world's population live in urban areas ,80% of the poverty will be among the rural populated areas. Since nearly one-third of the world's population resides in rural areas, tourism being a socioeconomic and cultural activity can bring in prosperity and self-empowerment to these areas.

[4] Tourists are often attracted to remote areas because of their high cultural, wildlife and landscape values. One of the assets of the poor is their cultural and wildlife heritage; and tourism presents opportunities to capitalise on those assets. Tourism offers better labour-intensive and small-scale opportunities than all sectors except agriculture. Tourism helps promote gender equality, employing a relatively high proportion of women than other sectors. Strategies for so called "pro-poor" tourism focus specifically on unlocking opportunities for the poor within tourism, rather than simply expanding the overall size of the sector.

[4] Tourism is a labour-intensive activity, [2] thus it can act as a driver of rural employment and entrepreneurship. [5] Since rural tourism is a socio-economic activity it helps to protect and improve both the natural and built environment and infrastructure. Urbanization and industrialization have resulted in decline of rural culture and lifestyle and rural areas has been facing serious environment damage issues. As natural environment has the greatest potential for tourism attraction and development, it is very imperative to conserve these natural areas, and preserve the local culture and heritage of rural areas to sustain the economic impulse from tourism.

[6].Tourism generates employment opportunities, new investment, new sources of income and governmental revenues, and finally, creates earnings through the exploitation of the host country's natural and cultural attractions in addition to promoting environmental protection and care.

[7]. Planning, implementation, and monitoring are critical in preventing rural damage. Rural tourism requires environmental management, local participation, sound legislation, sustainable marketing, and realistic planning. The quality and capacity of transportation and basic tourist infrastructure, such as toilets, parking, and lodging, are often substandard and unreliable in many rural areas. Therefore, developing community-based tourism infrastructure and attracting public-private partnerships can be a solution to this issue.

Since rural tourism activities occur in the fragile environment of rural areas, both physical and social environment; it is also very prone to overexploitation and degradation. Therefore, appropriate planning and measures such as carrying capacity, environment regulations and other strategies need to be followed. Overcrowding of tourists also diminishes the perceived quality of life of the rural community.

[8]. Only well-planned development can produce positive economic, social and environmental effect of rural tourism. Since the development objectives and goals spread across different realms, varied strategies and planning need to be implemented to achieve the different goals – economic, socio-cultural as well as environmental.

Thus, rural tourism can substantially contribute to the socioeconomic, cultural and environment sustainability of rural areas and empower them to be self-reliant and self-sufficient. At the same time it can also be witnessed that through the various initiatives these rural areas which have been neglected and left deteriorated could be revitalized.

Saudi Arabia's ambitious Vision 2030 initiative has identified tourism as a key driver of economic diversification, with plans to transform the Kingdom into a leading tourism destination by investing in infrastructure, heritage preservation, and sustainable development, thereby positioning rural areas like AIUla as integral components of its tourism strategy.

This paper intends to explore the different rural tourism planning strategies adopted in AIUla to achieve economic, socio-cultural as well as environmental sustainability.

II. ALULA -THE 2022 UNWTO

Best tourism village

[9]. AIUla, in northwest Saudi Arabia, is historically significant for its cultural heritage, landscapes, and emerging tourism. An ancient oasis city on the incense route linking India to the Levant

and Europe, it lies in the Hejaz region, with ties to Islam and pre-Islamic civilizations

[10]. The area is rich in ancient artifacts, including stone inscriptions illustrating Arabic's development, rock dwellings, and tombs from the Nabatean and Dedanite periods, influenced by Greco-Roman culture. Hegra, Saudi Arabia's UNESCO World Heritage Site, is 22 km north of AIUla, built over 2,000 years ago by the Nabataeans, comparable to Jordan's Petra. The ancient walled city of Al-Ula, near a vital oasis, with mud-brick and stone houses, was once the capital of the ancient Lihyanites (Dedanites).

[11]. AIUla is an old town with a rich cultural manifestation. It is home to over 900 traditional mud brick houses, 100 of which have previously undergone traditional building methods restoration. The Old Girls' School Madrasat Adeera, which has been converted into a school for teaching women how to make jewellery, pottery, and traditional handicrafts to be sold in the Old Town's tourist shops, is the focal point of the vibrant arts sector. Additionally, the town is preserving its intangible cultural heritage, which includes local dance, music, poetry, and storytelling customs, which are showcased at pop-up shows and cultural gatherings held in the Old Town.

[10]. The masterplan for Alula is envisioned as a cluster development showcasing the different cultural and ecological assets of the region named – Journey through time. Five unique districts, connected by a 20km-long public realm called the Wadi of Hospitality, will protect 200,000 years of natural and human history across the 20km-long core historical area of AIUla, a unique cultural landscape located in north-west Arabia, encompassing a wadi (seasonal river valley) and culminating in the Nabataean city of Hegra, a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

[12]. The AIUla Project aims to transform the region into a living museum, prioritize ecotourism, and focus on agriculture, hospitality, and arts to increase employment and provide educational opportunities. It also prioritizes sustainability and environmental stewardship to protect Saudi Arabia's water, wildlife, and flora. Prioritising sustainability and environmental stewardship so that jobs in Saudi Arabia do not come at the cost of flora, fauna, and water.

The Journey through Time will cover 5 districts – AIUla Old town, Dadan, Jabal Ikmah, Nabatean and Hegra district. [13]. The plan aims to build a resilient and sustainable destination by preserving natural and cultural environments, promoting local arts and heritage, ensuring wildlife conservation, fostering balanced agriculture, and

implementing measures for light-touch tourism, creative infrastructure, and undetectable security, all while fostering a secure and wholesome

environment conducive to circular economy principles.

III . RURAL TOURISM PLANNING STRATEGIES ADOPTED IN ALULA

a. [14] Carrying capacity – is limited to 800 visitors/day: 2groups (25 pax/each) every 30min for UNESCO World heritage site Hegra.

b. [10] Capacity building – Training college in culinary arts, hotel management and tourism professions in AIUla in partnership with French school of culinary arts and hospitality management FERRANDI. Three training workshops on equestrian skills (farrier, equestrian tourism, and stable management) were carried out, gathering over 65 participants from the AIUla community, to address the main workforce needs identified in the sector and source talents and candidates for the next core training programme.

[10] AIUla ambassador training program for local inhabitants and business owners to impart knowledge of the importance of the local and regional heritage and development of local pride of being from this place and to make them understand the international culture codes and expectations to facilitate better cultural exchange. Training programs are also proposed at local university and school level to give basic tourism training for the locals. Training programs for farmers about new agriculture practices were provided to encourage more locals to take part in it.

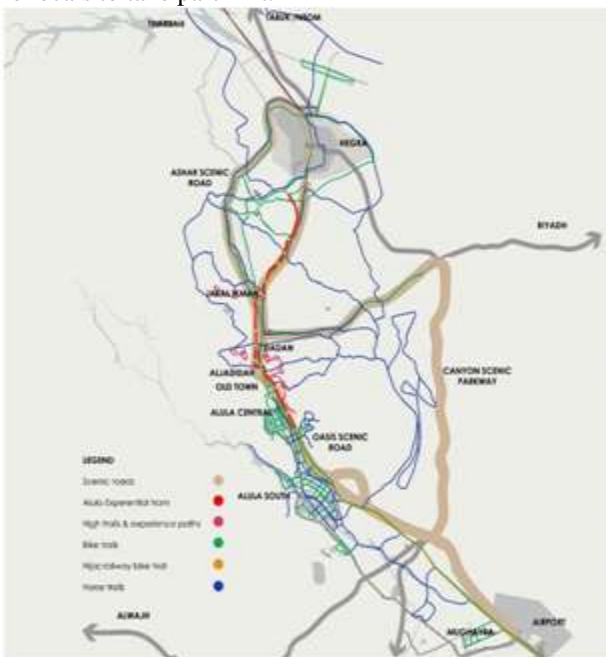
A. Economic dimension

[11] The Rawi initiative was founded in 2018 to engage villagers as tourism guides. The "Rawi," which translates to "storyteller" in Arabic, received training and off-site immersion in important tourism destinations such as Sedona to understand best practices. The Rawi program now employs more than 80 locals.

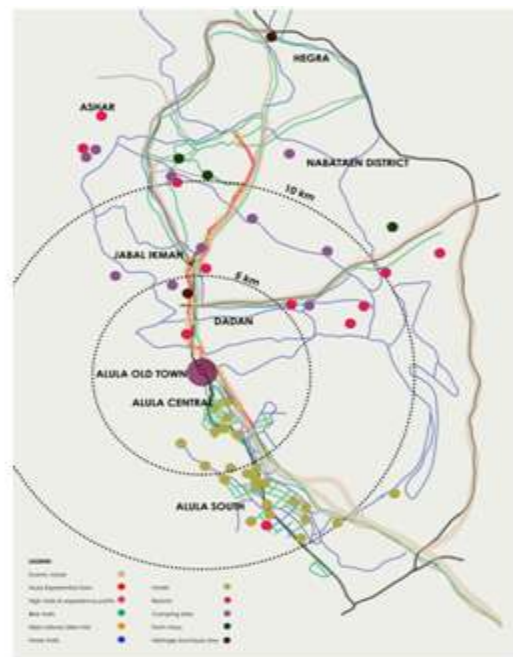
[12] Hammaya Program offers local youth the chance to become ambassadors for the project and learn about heritage preservation and sustainability.

c. [15] Road Network and accessibility - As part of the tourism infrastructure improvement, all the roads including local roads were improved, widened and pavement condition elevated to carry the incoming tourism traffic. The most important infrastructure improvement in this category will be the proposed expansion of AIUla international airport.

[16] A scenic roads connects the 5 districts - AIUla old town, Daman, Jabal Ikmah, Nabataean Horizon and Hegra Historical city. It is a 6 lane highway i.e, Highway 375. AIUla experiential tram is a 46 km low-carbon tramline that will connect the five sites to AIUla International Airport. The first phase of 22 km is now completed.



Road infrastructure of AlUla



Accommodation in and around AlUla

[17] As part of its commitment to develop convenient and sustainable public transport options, the Royal Commission for AlUla's smart pod pilot scheme will provide passengers with a quick and easy link to Al-Ula's Old Town.

d. [18] The high trails and experience paths in AlUla – The high trails are 8 km long adventure walk navigating a variety of diverse terrains, passing a wealth of ancient inscriptions and native wildlife. Experience paths are specially curated paths for experiencing the rich oasis and vegetations as well as heritage of the region. The Heritage trail, Oasis trail, orange trail etc are trails designed with meandering pathways or footpaths kept in original condition, through the oasis and heritage landscapes.

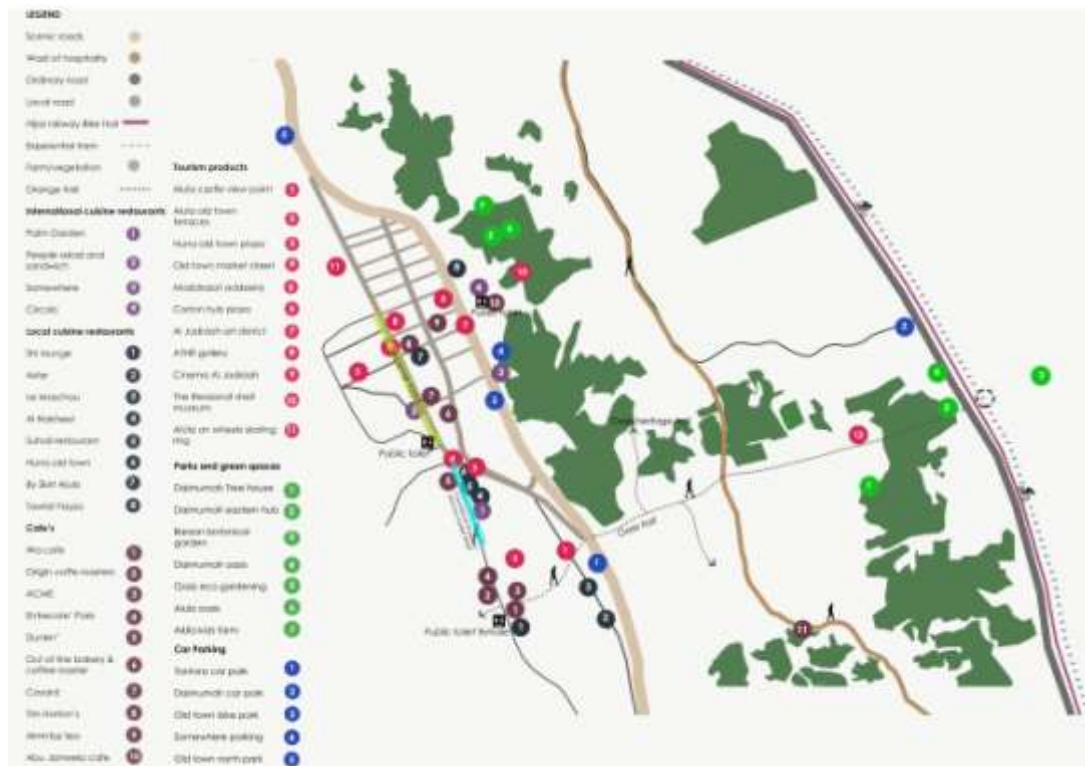
e. Facilities for cycling - These are trails to be used both by adventure enthusiasts and other normal tourists too to hop around in the tourism circuit as a sustainable means of transport. A bike park and rental is also made available along the bike trail.

f. [10] Footpaths - The five districts will be connected by the 20km Wadi of Hospitality, which will run along the bed of the old oasis and serve as The Journey Through Time's verdant "spine." This will be a continuous public square or plazas with vending markets, footpaths, recreational areas etc.

g. [11] Safety and security - The AlUla police station is situated at 3.5 km from the visitor centre from Alula old town. Fire station of this region immediately catering is located at 1km and the civil defence centre at 2.5 km. These facilities and their proximity establish a well curated safety and security to address any mishaps that may arise in the tourist centre. The Hammayah program gives part time job opportunities for the locals and they also act as protectors of heritage structures and report any type of vandalism to the respective authorities.

h. [19] Accommodation – Accommodation facilities in AlUla ranges from apartments to hotels to luxury resorts and glamping facilities. The master plan intends to add 5000 rooms by the end of 2035 and almost 7000 residential keys.

i. Restaurants - Restaurants of both local and global cuisine are made available and spatially located adjacent to main activity centres like Alula old town, Dadan route and in Hegra .More than 50 different cafes and restaurants constitute the food and beverage facility of Journey through time master plan. The many restaurants outside the old town is mainly in the resorts and hotel establishments and other local eateries scattered throughout the highway.



Map showing the rural tourism products in Alula old town

j. [20] Markets and other establishments – Alula master plan provisions for a market street in the old town which contains many stalls selling traditional Saudi Arabian handicrafts and local produce. Market stalls and shops are a mix of locally made souvenirs, arts and crafts and a curated selection of fashion, jewellery, homewares, entertainment and more. Highlights include the pressed oil store selling Moringa and other oils, which are the branded products of Alula farms the Athr Art Gallery, the Madrassat Addeera store selling art made by students of the nearby school, Desert Designs homewares and jewellery, the dates, citrus and spice stalls, and artisan soaps.

The Madrassat Addeera is an artisan complex which is functioning as a training and exhibition centre of the local handicraft items of Alula. This complex also has stalls aimed at selling the products made by the artisans of the complex. The master

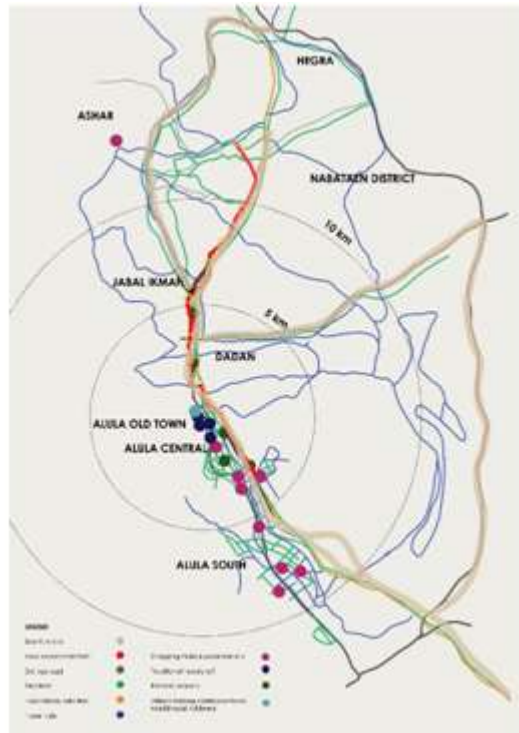
plan also provides for the various farmers markets including dates, citrus fruits ,moringa etc which are locally produced in the farms in Alula.

k. [16] Rural tourism products – The rural tourism products in the Journey through time master plan includes cultural and historical landmarks, farms and oasis, festivals and fairs, different segments of accommodation, restaurants, guided tours, adventure sports, horse riding, shopping markets, museums and art galleries and a plethora of parks, plazas, and gardens.

The 5 districts offer products of rich heritage value as well as natural beauty. Old town mainly focuses on cultural and heritage manmade structures such as the ancient mud brick settlement of AIUla, museums, artisan complex, restaurants, public plazas, trails for experiencing the oasis as well as the farming activities.



Journey Through Time masterplan



Map showing markets and other establishments

l. [21] Entrepreneurship opportunities through MSME’s – MSME development is one of the core principles of Journey through time master plan. Vibes AIUla, in collaboration with the Royal Commission for AIUla, provides mentorship, programs, services, and office space to activate AIUla's entrepreneurial ecosystem, has already

[21] AIUla's SMEs and MSMEs capitalize on local talent, natural resources, and cultural landscape.

educated 80 aspiring entrepreneurs as well as 60 micro and small enterprises.

[16] The master plan provides an enabling atmosphere to locals to invest in the tourism infrastructure through setting up eateries, farm stays, traditional shops, farmers markets etc. One such MSME opportunity provided is AIManshiyah farmers market.

Moringa oil manufacturing, date and citrus cultivation, handicrafts, arts and culture, culinary,

hospitality, and tourism services, and history and heritage are all possibilities.

m. [15] Job opportunities – One of the core ideology in the Journey through time master plan of RCU is local community empowerment through economic diversification, MSME opportunity as well as employment generation.

[15] According to the master plan, the hotel industry will generate 75% of all new jobs. A recent RCU study said that 5,274 persons have graduated from upskilling efforts to far, and about 2,278 jobs have been generated. Furthermore, almost 38,000 new employment will be generated by 2035. The expansion of SMEs and the broader economy contributes to RCU's goal of lowering unemployment to 7% by 2035 and raising the average monthly income per person from 5,460 riyals to 7,420 riyals.

[11] The Rawi and Hammayah program give necessary training and job opportunities as local tourist guides and keepers of heritage structure. The Hammayah program was established in 2019 and provides part-time employment opportunities for villagers who act as guardians of the heritage and natural assets of the local area.

B. Socio-cultural dimension

n. Educational institutions – [15] The master plan, focusing on empowerment of local community along with the revitalization and development of the town aims intends to cater to the need of the expected population growth in AIUla as part of its tourism development and enhancement. An international school has been set up in AIUla to cater to the growing population and immigration from all around the globe. RCU has extensive plans to deepen the horizon of educational infrastructure of the county as part of improving the quality of life of the people. A multi-year collaboration between RCU (Royal Commission of AIUla) and Al Faris International will see the next generation of citizens and residents flourish in an intellectually stimulating International Baccalaureate curriculum, upgrading the educational environment.

[15] The Royal Commission for AIUla (RCU) expects nearly 100,000 new residents by 2035 due to phase 3 developments. [21] To support locals and newcomers, the master plan prioritizes education and employment. This includes a Language Institute to bridge language gaps with tourists, [16] the Kingdom's Institute for archaeological study, and collaborations with institutions like King Saud

University and UNESCO. [10] Partnerships with FERRANDI Paris will enhance hospitality training through the International College for Tourism & Hospitality (ICTH). [23] Local educational institutions will also be strengthened, with initiatives like Maddrssat Addeera providing skill training, particularly benefiting women by creating alternative income sources and leveraging tourism opportunities. These efforts reflect a comprehensive approach to sustainable development and empowerment in AIUla.

o. [15] Healthcare infrastructure – The master plan extends the empowerment and improvement in the quality of life of the people even by strengthening the healthcare infrastructure of the county. Major healthcare investments include a 200 bedded hospital, a primary care facility, and aims at a 100% hospital coverage for the citizens.

The existing major hospitals are to revamped and strengthened to accommodate the needs of the growing population. Major tourism spots has some kind of primary medical facility available in minutes from the site such as Ashar urgent care centre, primary care centre at Dadan etc.

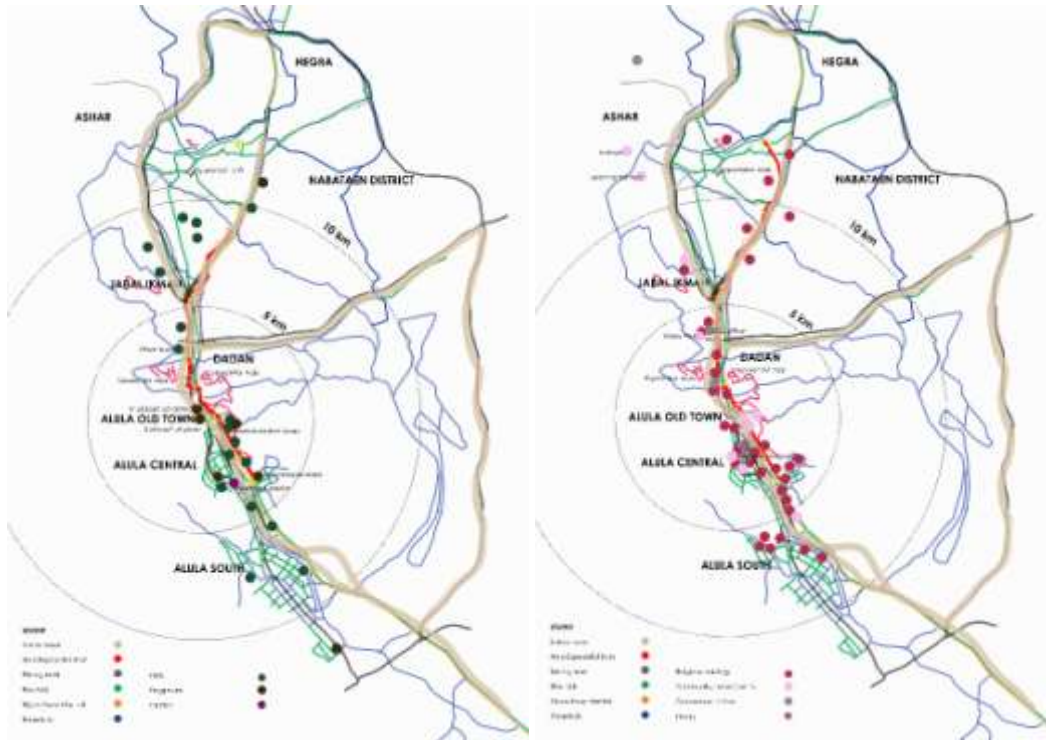
p. [15] Socio cultural facilities – The AIUla regeneration program is largely aimed at reviving the cultural and environmental landscape and heritage and it aims to create economic opportunities through sustainable circular economy.

[16] The master plan for AIUla aims to spotlight its 200,000-year-old cultural heritage and landscape through the development of 15 key assets. These include Perspectives Galleries, Wadi AlFann, Arts District, Oasis Living Gardens, Incense Museum and Gardens, Kingdoms Institute, Dadan Interpretive Centre, Jabal Ikmah Interpretive Centre, Incense Road Market, Life & Memory Galleries, Hegra Museum, Nabataean Theatre, Arabian Horse Heritage, Black Basalt Museum, and Skyviews. These assets form the core of the regional plan, focusing on preserving and promoting AIUla's rich cultural and heritage legacy.

[16] AIUla's regional plan highlights cultural events like the Tantora Arts and Music Festival, Azimuth Music Festival, and AIUla Arts Festival. To support these, venues such as Maraya Concert Hall and Winter at Tantora event spaces have been established. [24] The plan also focuses on revitalizing the cultural oasis, creating trails like the Oasis Heritage Trail and Dadan Heritage Trail. Restoration efforts include traditional farming practices and water-conserving irrigation systems.

q. [15] Open spaces, parks and playgrounds – Multipurpose stadium & a community sports complex along with three football pitches is proposed to be developed in this region as part of

the development purposes. (AIUla R. C., Progress and Opportunity, 2022). A number small and big parks and gardens has been developed and already existing ones has been revamped.



Map showing the parks, open spaces, and playgrounds available within 5 km and 10 km of AIUla Old town and Map showing major socio-cultural amenities available in AIUla

r. [15] Electricity connection – Has a substation and also the plan aims to increase 500 MW+ of clean power capacity to the grid of AIUla. This has to be achieved through enhanced clean power capacity (solar PV & battery farm). Works have already started on these renewable energy sources. The farms are located on north and south of AIUla and together will generate 1GW capacity by 2035 and reduce 2.5 million tonnes of emission reiterating the Saudi vision 2030.

pavilions. Equestrian villages and horse trails honour the significance of horses in Saudi Arabian culture, and [11] intangible cultural assets are preserved through pop-up events in the Old Town. These efforts showcase a commitment to preserving AIUla's heritage while fostering sustainable development.

s. Preservation of cultural assets and culture - [25] AIUla's rich cultural heritage, spanning over 200,000 years, is undergoing a revival through the Journey Through Time master plan. Maddrassat Addeera serves as a hub for traditional handicrafts, while 15 cultural assets, including the Oasis Trail and Hegra Museum, are targeted for revitalization. The carrying capacity of Hegra is limited to maintain its UNESCO-listed status. The Cultural Oasis initiative aims to revive the region's agricultural practices, while traditional markets like AIUla Old Town Market Street are promoted. Al Jadidah Art District hosts exhibitions and handicraft

t. [10] Heritage conservation - Extensive groundwork has meticulously documented and inventoried 900 heritage mud brick structures in the old town, mapping, and photo-documenting each. Restoration efforts have utilized traditional mud plastering techniques to revive dilapidated buildings. Comprehensive heritage conservation guidelines have been established to guide preservation efforts.

The Kingdom's Institute serves as a center for research and scientific experimentation focused on heritage and conservation. Measures to protect the Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) of the UNESCO-listed World Heritage site Hegra have been implemented, including limiting daily visitors to 800 people.

u. [16] Traditional handicrafts - AIUla's rich tradition of handicrafts, including palm leaf weaving and pottery making, is being revitalized through initiatives like Maddrassat Addeera. This artisan complex provides training and income opportunities for women, while also fostering entrepreneurship among locals in the Al Jadidah art district. Events like the Dates Festival and farmer markets offer platforms for showcasing these traditional crafts, promoting both economic growth and cultural heritage.

C. Environmental dimension

v. Ecological conservation – AIUla prioritizes ecological preservation through initiatives like the [26] Sharaan Nature Reserve, which safeguards habitats and biodiversity while restoring nature's balance. RCU focuses on sustainable development and heritage preservation, implementing measures like ending overgrazing and reintroducing native species. Collaborating with the IUCN, RCU aims for recognition on the Green List for efficient protected area management.

[16] The Ancient Oasis revitalization project reverses desertification and promotes sustainable agriculture, aligning with the Saudi Green Initiative. The Arabian Leopard Program conserves the critically endangered species within the Sharaan Nature Reserve. RCU, with the IUCN, establishes six nature reserves covering 13,000 km², aiming to protect 80% of AIUla's land. [26] A plant nursery provides species for landscaping and ecological restoration. Trained Rangers enforce conservation measures, creating employment opportunities. The Reserve's habitat restoration fosters ecotourism, aiding the region's sustainable development while preserving its natural heritage.

w. Preserving agrobiodiversity - [26] To preserve agrobiodiversity, the AIUla Cultural Oasis is undergoing rejuvenation efforts led by RCU. These efforts include re-engaging local farmers, enhancing agricultural profitability through tourism activities, and establishing efficient irrigation systems. The AIUla native plant nursery and seed bank play a crucial role in arid ecosystem restoration, collecting seeds and producing seedlings from native plant species. Since its launch in 2019, the nursery has made significant progress, employing 22 individuals and producing over 350,000 high-quality seedlings. It serves as a model for similar projects in Saudi Arabia and has contributed to ecological restoration efforts in the Sharaan Nature Reserve. Additionally, an inventory of native plant species guides environmental regeneration and other developments in the region.

[27] AIUla's agricultural sector is undergoing revitalization with a focus on high-value crops like Moringa Peregrina and citrus trees. To increase the economic capacity of Moringa, Alula Peregrina Trading Company (APTC) has been established, obtaining patents for two cosmetic products. Pilot farms and farmer training programs, along with the Peregrina Centre for Moringa-Oil products and Farmers' markets, support Moringa cultivation.

[15] RCU's initiatives include modernizing irrigation systems, reviving agricultural activities in abandoned regions, and promoting green-manure crops and vegetable cultivation.[20] The Orange Path, adorned with citrus trees, celebrates AIUla's agricultural heritage and hosts the winter Citrus Festival.

[15] Organic farming practices are supported through AIUla Organic Farms, with a fresh farm market catering to organic produce. Date palm cultivation, integral to AIUla's legacy, boasts 2.3 million trees, celebrated annually at the Date Festival, highlighting the economic and cultural significance of dates in the region.

x. Waste management – [15] RCU has proposed upgraded wastewater strategy, with 36,500 m³/d of wastewater capacity and new solid waste capabilities anchored in circular economy principles. [28] AIUla's waste management philosophy embraces the concept of a circular economy, moving away from the linear 'take, make, waste' model to a more sustainable 'take, retake, remake, restore' approach. This mimics nature, where waste from one organism serves as sustenance for another. The aim is to apply this principle to industrial products, promoting continuous recirculation and reuse instead of discarding them as waste.

y. Sanitation – [15] Comfort stations and public toilets have been developed in the main tourist hotspots of the region- in AIUla old town, Dadan etc. RCU has proposed upgraded wastewater strategy, with 36,500 m³/d of wastewater capacity.

z. Water - [19] Alula being an oasis has underground water reserves but the need is to prevent it from over exploitation. For this, new technologically advanced irrigation system is developed, and it is to be practised for all agricultural activities. Other projects include upgraded water system with safe and secure supply of 46,000 m³/d by 2035 and achieve 32,000 m³/d production of potable water capacity and [29] RCU plans to upgrade water supply with more desalinated water.

IV. DISCUSSION

AIUla's comprehensive rural tourism planning techniques provide a comprehensive approach to sustainable development that considers economic, socio-cultural, and environmental factors. These policies represent a coordinated effort to use AIUla's unique cultural and natural legacy to promote economic development, community empowerment, and environmental protection.

One important part of AIUla's rural tourism strategy is the emphasis on capacity building and skill development. The local population is provided with the essential skills and knowledge to actively engage in and benefit from the tourist business through programs such as the AIUla ambassador training program, the Rawi initiative, and vocational training workshops. This not only offers job possibilities, but also protects and promotes local culture and traditions.

Infrastructure development is critical to improving the tourist experience and accessibility of rural tourism locations. AIUla's emphasis on developing road networks, public transit, and lodging facilities enables a smooth flow of visitors while reducing environmental effect. Furthermore, projects such as the interactive tram and adventure trails provide travellers one-of-a-kind possibilities to discover AIUla's different landscapes and historical places while remaining environmentally conscious.

Furthermore, AIUla's dedication to environmental protection is demonstrated by its efforts to protect agrobiodiversity, rehabilitate ecosystems, and adopt sustainable waste management methods. Initiatives such as the AIUla native plant nursery, organic agricultural initiatives, and trash recycling programs help to prevent environmental deterioration while also increasing the region's resilience and long-term sustainability.

In addition to economic and environmental considerations, AIUla's rural tourism planning also prioritizes socio-cultural initiatives aimed at preserving and promoting local heritage, fostering community engagement, and enhancing visitor experiences. One notable aspect is the focus on cultural preservation through initiatives like the Rawi program and heritage site restoration. These efforts involve the local community in safeguarding and sharing their traditions, fostering a sense of pride and ownership. Moreover, partnerships with educational institutions and UNESCO promote cultural understanding, while investments in public spaces and community centres enhance social cohesion. Employment and entrepreneurship programs empower residents

economically, contributing to poverty alleviation and social inclusion. AIUla's approach demonstrates a holistic model that integrates economic, environmental, and socio-cultural elements, positioning it as a global exemplar for rural tourism planning.

V. CONCLUSION

AIUla's rural tourism planning exemplifies a comprehensive approach that intertwines economic prosperity, environmental sustainability, and socio-cultural enrichment. Through meticulous strategies ranging from capacity building and infrastructure development to heritage conservation and community empowerment, AIUla has emerged as a beacon of successful rural tourism planning. The integration of local traditions, educational initiatives, and entrepreneurship opportunities not only drives economic growth but also preserves cultural heritage and fosters social cohesion. By embracing principles of sustainability, AIUla ensures that tourism development harmonizes with ecological conservation, creating a model that balances economic progress with environmental stewardship. As a result, AIUla stands as a testament to the transformative power of rural tourism when guided by thoughtful planning and inclusive practices and is a model that can be adopted by many .

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