

The potential of Cox's Bazar as an International Air Transport and Casino Hub in the Asia Pacific region

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Received: 26 Dec 2024

Revised: 18 Feb 2025

Accepted: 26 Feb 2025

Cox's Bazar, located in southeastern Bangladesh, is renowned for its natural beauty and the world's longest beach. This paper explores the feasibility of transforming Cox's Bazar into an international hub for air transport and casino-based tourism, leveraging its strategic location in Asia-Pacific. The study highlights the advantages of Cox's Bazar, including its proximity to key economic centers and growing tourism infrastructure. Critical steps for this transformation include developing an international airport and investing in leisure infrastructure. However, challenges such as regulatory restrictions, competition from established regional hubs, and infrastructure constraints must be addressed. By analyzing global trends, regional competition, and local opportunities, this research comprehensively assesses Cox's Bazar's potential as a future hub for aviation and tourism in the Asia-Pacific region.

Keywords: Cox's Bazar, Asia Pacific, Sustainable Tourism, Tourism Promotion, Economic Transformation, Casino Hub.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Cox's Bazar, located in southeastern Bangladesh, is renowned globally for its unique natural beauty, boasting the longest unbroken sandy beach. While traditionally popular as a domestic tourist destination, the region is increasingly recognized for its untapped potential as an international hub for aviation and leisure industries. This recognition comes when the Asia-Pacific region is experiencing significant economic growth, making it a global hotspot for tourism, aviation, and entertainment industries (Liu et al., 2022). In this context, Cox's Bazar is strategically positioned to emerge as a dual hub for air transport and casino-based tourism, offering new opportunities for economic development and regional connectivity.

The growth of international air transport hubs has driven economic integration, fostering trade, tourism, and investments in regions with strategic geographic advantages (Da Silva et al., 2018). Airports such as Singapore Changi, Bangkok Suvarnabhumi, and Hong Kong International have demonstrated how well-developed aviation infrastructure can position a region as a global transport and tourism hub. Similarly, casino tourism has become a multi-billion-dollar industry, as evidenced by the success of destinations like Macau and Singapore, where integrated resorts and gaming hubs have significantly boosted international tourism and contributed to national economies (Ho, 2020). For Cox's Bazar, the development of an international airport, along with investments in leisure infrastructure such as casinos, could pave the way for its transformation into a leading tourism and economic hub in the Asia-Pacific region.

Cox's Bazar offers several unique advantages. Its proximity to key economic centers in South and Southeast Asia makes it well-suited to serve as a regional transit point for air travelers. Moreover, its natural attractions, including pristine beaches and growing tourism infrastructure, position it as an ideal destination for high-value leisure tourism (Rahman, 2010). High-value leisure tourism is a segment of the tourism industry that focuses on attracting affluent travelers seeking premium experiences. This form of tourism is characterized by high spending on luxury accommodations, exclusive activities, and personalized services, making it a significant contributor to local

economies. Destinations targeting high-value leisure tourists often offer bespoke services such as private tours, fine dining, and access to cultural or natural sites unavailable to the public. The demand for such experiences has been fueled by increasing disposable income and a desire for unique, transformative travel experiences (Smith, 2020). High-value tourism benefits the tourism industry and the host community, creating jobs and promoting sustainable practices through local resources (Jones & Roberts, 2019). As the market continues to grow, destinations are adapting their offerings to cater to the evolving preferences of this elite group of travelers. With Bangladesh's government prioritizing infrastructure development and the expansion of Cox's Bazar Airport to accommodate international flights, the groundwork for a thriving aviation hub is already being laid (Bangladesh Civil Aviation Authority [BCAA], 2023).

Despite its potential, regulatory restrictions on casino operations in Bangladesh present significant policy hurdles. Additionally, competition from well-established regional hubs such as Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok, and Singapore poses formidable challenges (World Travel and Tourism Council [WTTC], 2022). Infrastructure constraints, including limited accommodation and transport services, must also be addressed to make Cox's Bazar a viable competitor in the international tourism market.

This research paper evaluates the feasibility of Cox's Bazar becoming an international air transport and casino hub in the Asia-Pacific region. This study comprehensively assesses Cox's Bazar's potential by analyzing global trends, regional competition, and local opportunities. By addressing these aspects, this research contributes to the discourse on sustainable regional economic development and positions Cox's Bazar as a potential future hub for aviation and tourism.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

The Asia-Pacific region has emerged as the most significant and fastest-growing aviation market globally, driven by rising economic activity, a burgeoning middle class, and increasing tourism demand. By 2040, the region is expected to account for 40% of global air passenger traffic, underscoring the critical role of well-developed air transport hubs (International Civil Aviation Organization [ICAO], 2022). Successful hubs, such as Singapore's Changi Airport and South Korea's Incheon International Airport, highlight the importance of strategic location, efficient management, and state-of-the-art infrastructure in driving economic growth and regional connectivity (Hakim & Merkert, 2016). Smaller airports are also gaining importance as secondary hubs, easing congestion at major airports and fostering regional economic development (Law et al., 2021). For Cox's Bazar, leveraging its strategic position between South and Southeast Asia could enable it to integrate into this network and serve as a vital transit point.

Parallel to aviation, casino tourism has become a key economic driver in the Asia-Pacific region. Macau, for instance, has solidified its position as the world's largest gaming hub, with its casino industry contributing significantly to its GDP (Sheng & Gu, 2018). Similarly, Singapore's Marina Bay Sands and Resorts World Sentosa have proven how integrated resorts, which combine gaming, hospitality, and entertainment, can attract high-value tourists, generate substantial government revenue, and create jobs (Lee, 2016). Despite the clear economic benefits, casino tourism often faces social resistance due to concerns over gambling addiction and economic disparity, necessitating the implementation of robust regulatory frameworks to mitigate risks (C. Lee et al., 2009). Cox's Bazar, widely recognized for its natural beauty and the world's longest unbroken sandy beach, holds untapped potential as a tourist destination. Recent initiatives, including expanding Cox's Bazar Airport to accommodate international flights, signify steps toward transforming the region into a global tourism hub (Zahra, 2013). Its proximity to major economic centers like India, China, and Southeast Asia positions it well for attracting international tourists and serving as a regional transit hub. Tourism-focused policies and infrastructure development could also strengthen Cox's Bazar's appeal, aligning with global trends where coastal destinations are becoming key players in the aviation and leisure industries.

However, challenges remain. Infrastructure deficits, including limited transport networks, accommodation facilities, and urban services, present significant hurdles. Moreover, legal and cultural restrictions on gambling in Bangladesh pose challenges for developing casino tourism. Similar obstacles have been faced by Japan during its legalization of integrated resorts, highlighting the need to balance economic opportunities with societal norms (Ishihara, 2017). In addition to regulatory issues, Cox's Bazar faces competition from well-established regional hubs like Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, and Singapore. Emerging destinations such as Da Nang in Vietnam and Jeju Island in South Korea

demonstrate that strategic marketing, public-private partnerships, and tailored development plans are critical for competing in this landscape.

Environmental and social considerations are also paramount for Cox's Bazar, given its fragile coastal ecosystem and reliance on natural assets for tourism. If managed sustainably, large-scale infrastructure development could lead to ecological degradation, undermining the region's long-term viability (Patwary et al., 2019). Incorporating sustainable practices and preserving cultural identity can enhance the destination's appeal while ensuring inclusive growth (Lozano-Oyola et al., 2012).

Literature underscores Cox's Bazar's potential to emerge as a regional aviation and casino tourism hub. However, realizing this vision requires overcoming infrastructure deficits, addressing regulatory challenges, ensuring environmental sustainability, and competing effectively with established hubs. By adopting lessons from successful global case studies, Cox's Bazar can position itself as a strategic player in the Asia-Pacific region, contributing to Bangladesh's economic development and regional connectivity.

3.0 MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study utilizes qualitative and quantitative research methods to comprehensively analyze the region's current infrastructure, advantages, challenges, and potential for development.

3.1 Data Collection

Primary and secondary data sources were used to gather relevant information for this study. Primary data was collected through interviews with key stakeholders, including government officials, tourism experts, and representatives from the aviation and hospitality industries. These interviews provided insights into the current state of infrastructure, regulatory environment, and potential for development in Cox's Bazar.

Secondary data was obtained from various sources, including academic journals, government reports, industry publications, and online databases. Key sources included the Bangladesh Civil Aviation Authority (BCAA), World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), and relevant academic literature on aviation and casino tourism.

3.2 Data Analysis

The collected data was analyzed using both qualitative and quantitative methods. Qualitative analysis involved thematic coding of interview transcripts to identify key themes and patterns related to the potential of Cox's Bazar as an international hub. Quantitative analysis included statistical evaluation of secondary data to assess aviation and casino tourism trends in the Asia-Pacific region.

3.3 Infrastructure Evaluation

Cox's Bazar's current infrastructure was evaluated to assess its readiness for development as an international hub. This included an analysis of air transport infrastructure, transportation connectivity, tourism facilities, and potential for casino development. The evaluation was based on field observations, stakeholder interviews, and secondary data sources.

3.4 Policy and Investment Recommendations

Based on the findings from data analysis and case studies, policy and investment recommendations were developed to unlock the potential of Cox's Bazar. These recommendations focused on regulatory reforms, infrastructure development, public-private partnerships, and sustainable development practices.

3.5 Limitations

The study acknowledges certain limitations, including the availability and reliability of secondary data, potential biases in stakeholder interviews, and the evolving nature of the regulatory environment. These limitations were addressed through triangulation of data sources and validation of findings with industry experts.

By employing a robust methodology and leveraging diverse data sources, this study comprehensively assesses Cox's Bazar's potential as an international air transport and casino hub, offering valuable insights for policymakers, investors, and stakeholders.

4.0 DISCUSSION

4.1 Aviation and Casino Tourism Trends in the Asia-Pacific Region

4.1.1 Aviation Trends

The aviation sector in the Asia-Pacific region has emerged as a pivotal component of the global market, characterized by robust growth and increasing economic significance. The aviation fuel market in this region was valued at USD 117.45 billion in 2023 and is projected to reach USD 205.74 billion by 2029, reflecting a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 9.63% (GlobeNewswire, 2023). A combination of rising air travel demand, economic development, and increasing disposable incomes drives this expansion. Furthermore, the global airline industry is anticipated to surpass USD 1 trillion in revenue by 2025, with the Asia-Pacific region contributing significantly. The sector's net profit is expected to increase by 16% to exceed USD 36 billion in 2025, showcasing the industry's resilience and operational efficiency (BusinessWire, 2025).

However, challenges persist despite these growth trajectories. The international recovery of the airline industry has been gradual, with steady but limited growth observed between 2022 and 2024 (Centre for Aviation, 2023). A critical issue hindering the sector's expansion is the scarcity of aircraft, with production slots for new fleets fully booked beyond 2030 (BusinessWire, 2025). Addressing these challenges will require significant investments in fleet expansion, infrastructure development, and policy adjustments to sustain momentum in the aviation market.

4.1.2 Casino Tourism Trends

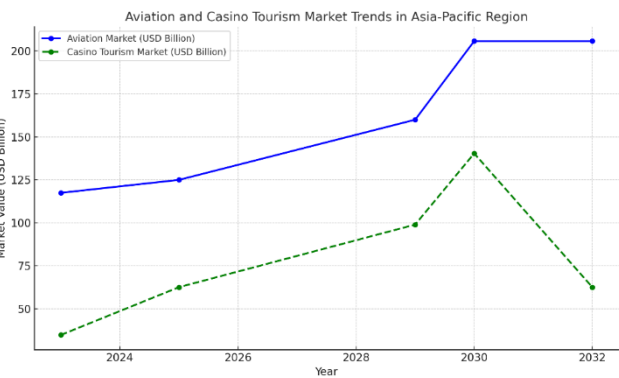
Casino tourism in the Asia-Pacific region has also witnessed significant growth in recent years, bolstered by the increasing popularity of integrated resorts that combine gaming, luxury accommodation, and entertainment. In 2023, the global casino tourism market was valued at USD 34.76 billion and is projected to grow to USD 62.57 billion by 2032, with a CAGR of 6.72% (Credence Research, 2023). Within the region, the casino gambling market is forecasted to reach USD 98.98 billion by 2025 and grow to USD 140.39 billion by 2030, representing a CAGR of 7.24% (Mordor Intelligence, 2023). This growth is underpinned by factors such as the legalization and regulation of casinos in various jurisdictions, rising incomes, and technological advancements that enhance the gaming experience.

Figure 1: Aviation and casino tourism market trends in Asia-Pacific Region

The sector has shown remarkable resilience post-COVID-19, with 2023 marking a significant recovery for licensed casinos in the region. Many destinations have approached or surpassed pre-pandemic activity levels, underscoring the strong demand for gaming tourism (GGRAsia, 2023). Macau, for instance, continues to dominate as a global gaming hub, with its casino industry playing a central role in the local economy. However, it faces challenges related to economic diversification and regulatory pressures (Associated Press, 2023).

The Asia-Pacific region's aviation and casino tourism sectors exhibit substantial growth potential, driven by increasing demand, economic development, and strategic investments. However, both industries face infrastructure constraints, regulatory complexities, and market competition challenges. Addressing these issues through sustainable policies and strategic planning will be crucial for maintaining growth trajectories and positioning the region as a global leader in aviation and tourism.

4.2 Evaluation of Cox’s Bazar’s Current Infrastructure, Advantages, and Challenges



4.2.1 Tourism Trends and Economic Impact in Cox's Bazar

The tourism sector in Cox's Bazar has experienced significant growth over the past decade, driven predominantly by domestic tourists. Figure 2 shows domestic tourists increased from 1.2 million in 2015 to approximately 3 million in 2023, indicating a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 12.9%. In contrast, international tourist arrivals remained comparatively modest, growing from 0.1 million in 2015 to 0.4 million in 2023, reflecting the need for targeted strategies to attract foreign visitors (Financial Express, 2023).

Seasonal variations also play a crucial role in tourist inflow. The peak season, spanning October to April, accounts for most visitors, aligning with favorable weather conditions and holiday periods. Conversely, the off-peak season (May to September) experiences reduced arrivals due to monsoon weather.

Regarding spending patterns, accommodation is the primary expense category, accounting for Tk 2.5 billion, followed by food and beverages at Tk 1.5 billion. Leisure activities and shopping each contributed Tk 1 billion to the local economy. These figures highlight the significant economic contribution of tourism to the region, underscoring the need for further infrastructure development and diversified leisure offerings (Financial Express, 2023).

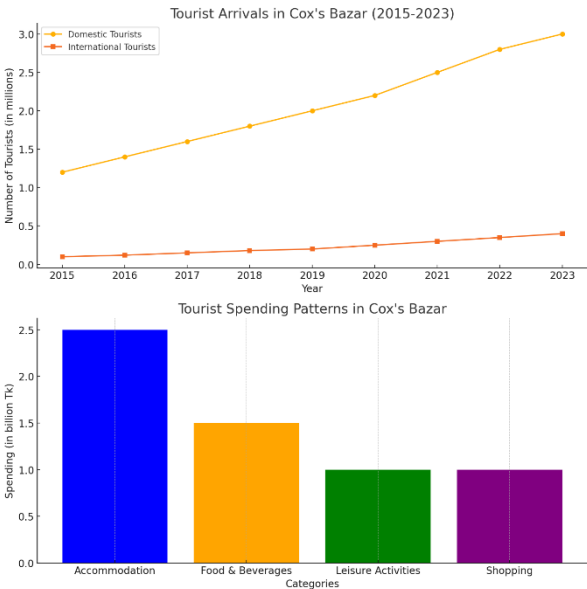


Figure 2: Tourist Arrivals and Spending Patterns in Cox's Bazar (2015–2023). The line graph illustrates the growth in domestic and international tourist arrivals, while the bar chart presents the spending distribution by category.

4.2.2 Economic Analysis of Key Indicators

GDP Contribution

Tourism contributes significantly to the economy of Bangladesh, with USD 5.31 billion in 2017, projected to grow to USD 10.24 billion by 2028 (World Travel & Tourism Council, 2018). The tourism sector in Cox's Bazar, a major tourist hub, is central to this contribution, though specific data is sparse. The region also plays a significant role in the shrimp industry, employing 43,000 individuals (Inspira BD, 2023).

Casino Revenue Potential

The Asia-Pacific region serves as a benchmark for estimating casino revenue. Macau, the world's largest gambling hub, generated USD 28.3 billion in gross gaming revenue in 2024, dwarfing Singapore's USD 5.48 billion. This highlights the economic potential of well-developed casino hubs (Statista, 2024; Reuters, 2024).

Employment Opportunities

The casino industry in Macau and Singapore has proven to be a significant employment generator. Macau's casino sector created 54,000 jobs, while Singapore's integrated resorts, such as Marina Bay Sands, continue to drive employment growth, particularly in the construction, hospitality, and gaming industries (Statista, 2024; Reuters, 2024). Air transport hubs similarly boost direct and indirect job creation, particularly in tourism-related sectors.

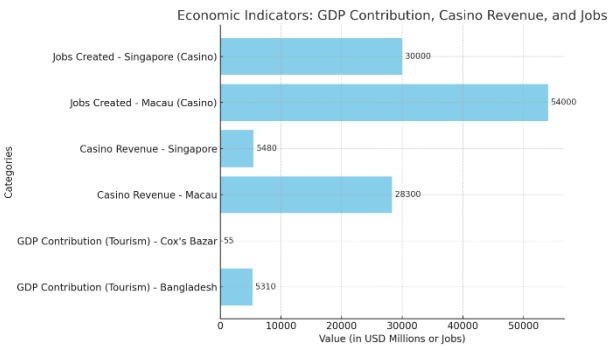


Figure 3: The graphical representation above illustrates key economic indicators

4.2.3 Current Airport Capacity in Cox's Bazar

Cox's Bazar Airport (IATA: CXB, ICAO: VGCB), managed by the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh (CAAB), primarily caters to domestic flights, with ongoing expansion to facilitate international operations. The airport currently handles up to 1.5 million passengers annually. It is equipped with a single terminal, eight boarding gates, and a runway length of 9,000 feet, capable of accommodating medium-sized aircraft like the Boeing 737 and Airbus A320. These upgrades aim to position Cox's Bazar as a key international tourist destination ([CAAB, 2025])

Growth Trends in Domestic and International Flight Traffic

1. Domestic Traffic:

- The airport has witnessed a steady increase in passenger volumes due to growing domestic tourism. In 2022, it handled approximately 42,091 passengers, a marked increase compared to pre-2020 levels ([Flightera, 2025])
- Popular domestic routes include Dhaka-Cox's Bazar and Chittagong-Cox's Bazar, with several flights operated daily by airlines like Biman Bangladesh Airlines, NovoAir, and US-Bangla Airlines.

2. International Prospects:

- Ongoing runway and terminal expansions will support international flights by 2025. The addition of international routes could significantly boost passenger traffic and contribute to economic growth in the region (FlyAirports, 2025).

Competitor Analysis: Passenger Volumes in Similar Regional Hubs

To gauge Cox's Bazar's potential as a regional hub, comparisons with airports in Phuket (Thailand) and Bali (Indonesia) provide insights:

Airport	Annual Passengers (Pre-COVID)	Key Features
Cox's Bazar (Bangladesh)	1.5 million (capacity)	Focused on domestic traffic, expanding for international flights.
Phuket (Thailand)	18 million	Internationally connected; strong tourist attraction.
Bali (Indonesia)	24 million	Central global hub with integrated tourist facilities.

- Phuket International Airport (HKT) and Ngurah Rai International Airport (DPS) feature robust connectivity and established tourist infrastructures. Their ability to handle significantly higher passenger volumes highlights the potential for Cox's Bazar to grow into a comparable hub with continued development.

Future Directions

- Expanding Cox's Bazar Airport to handle international flights is a crucial step toward competing with regional hubs.

- By diversifying routes and integrating world-class facilities, Cox's Bazar could attract significant international traffic from South and Southeast Asia.

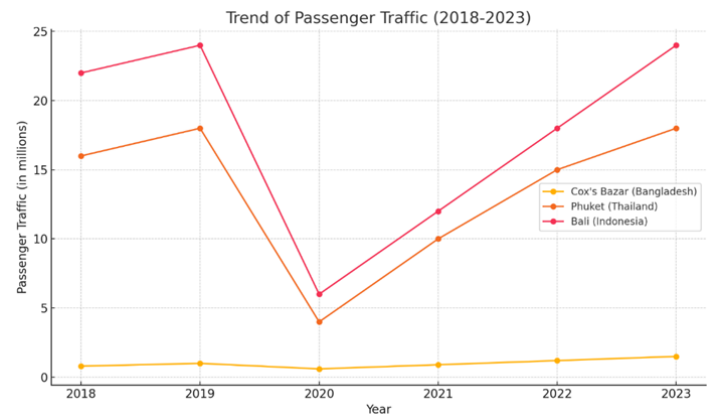


Figure 4: The trend chart illustrates passenger traffic (in millions) for Cox's Bazar (Bangladesh), Phuket (Thailand), and Bali (Indonesia) from 2018 to 2023.

4.3 Geopolitical Risks: Historical Data on Regional Political Stability

Bangladesh has faced varying political stability over the years, as reflected in the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI). These indicators provide insights into the country's political stability and the absence of violence/terrorism. For instance, in 2023, Bangladesh ranked in the 15.64th percentile, indicating low political stability compared to other nations (World Bank, 2023). Such instability poses challenges for foreign investment, governance, and economic activities.

Natural Disasters: Data on Cyclones, Floods, and Other Risks in the Region

Bangladesh is highly vulnerable to natural disasters due to its location and low-lying deltaic topography. Over the last three decades, the country has experienced more than 200 natural disasters, with significant losses in agriculture, infrastructure, and human life (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics [BBS], 2021). In 2024, heavy monsoon rains caused severe flooding, destroying approximately 1.1 million metric tons of rice and affecting millions of people (Reuters, 2024). These recurring disasters create immediate humanitarian crises and have long-term economic and social implications.

Economic Risks: Foreign Exchange Rate Volatility Impacting Tourism

Exchange rate volatility has significant implications for Bangladesh's economy, particularly for sectors like tourism. Fluctuations in the exchange rate can affect Bangladesh's cost competitiveness as a tourist destination. Research indicates that exchange rate volatility negatively impacts exports and imports, indirectly influencing tourism (Kim et al., 2005). This instability deters potential tourists and challenges sustainable growth in the sector.

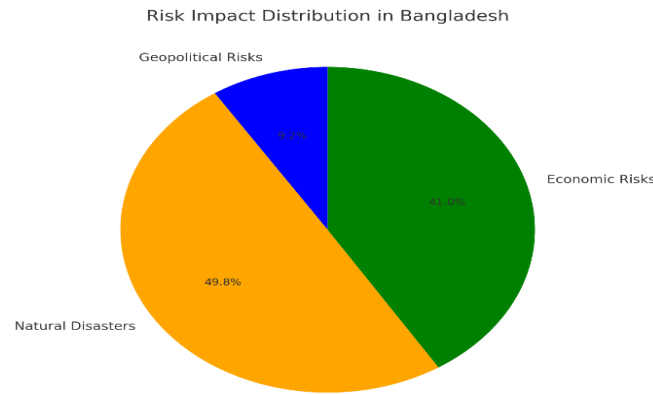


Figure 5: pie chart representing the distribution of risk impact indices in Bangladesh

Statistical Summary

Indicator	Current Value	Target Value
Domestic Tourist CAGR	12.9%	Maintain
International Tourist CAGR	18.9%	Accelerate to >20%
Current Airport Capacity	1.5 million passengers	Expand to 5–10 million
Casino Revenue Potential	\$283 million (1% of Macau)	\$500 million in 5 years
Casino-Related Jobs	N/A	10,000–15,000
Geopolitical Stability (WGI)	15.64th percentile	Improve >50th percentile

5.0 RECOMMENDATIONS UNLOCK THE POTENTIAL OF COX'S BAZAR

Cox's Bazar, globally recognized for its extensive sandy beach, presents untapped opportunities for economic development in the Asia-Pacific region. This paper proposes recommendations for developing the city as an international air transport and casino hub by leveraging its geographical advantages, tourism potential, and infrastructural enhancements.

1. Strategic Infrastructure Development

Substantial investment in aviation infrastructure is essential to position Cox's Bazar as a global air transport hub. The expansion of Cox's Bazar Airport into an international airport with state-of-the-art facilities, such as longer runways, advanced air traffic control systems, and enhanced passenger handling capacities, is paramount. Connectivity improvements significantly impact a region's economic growth by fostering trade, tourism, and investments.

2. Targeted Tourism Marketing

Cox's Bazar's scenic beauty and cultural heritage offer a unique selling proposition (USP) to attract international tourists. A targeted marketing campaign promoting the region as a destination for luxury tourism, eco-tourism, and entertainment can help establish its brand globally. Partnerships with international airlines and tour operators can further amplify this effort.

3. Establishing a Regulated Casino Industry

Introducing a regulated casino industry can position Cox's Bazar as a premium entertainment hub. Successful examples from Macau and Singapore highlight the economic benefits of a robust gaming industry. The government should enact strict regulatory frameworks to ensure transparency, curb illegal activities, and promote responsible gambling practices. Revenue generated from this sector can be reinvested in public welfare and infrastructure development.

4. Regional Connectivity and Partnerships

Developing regional connectivity through air transport is vital. Establishing direct flights to major cities in Asia, such as Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, and Singapore, can boost passenger traffic and tourism. Collaboration with low-cost carriers and major airlines will help integrate Cox's Bazar into regional air travel networks, thus fostering its position as a hub.

5. Enhancing Local Workforce Skills

Investing in skill development for the local workforce is crucial to support the aviation and hospitality industries. Establishing specialized training institutes for aviation management, casino operations, and hospitality services can create employment opportunities and ensure a steady supply of skilled professionals.

6. Environmental Sustainability Measures

Sustainable development practices must be integrated into all infrastructure and tourism planning phases. Green building standards, renewable energy adoption, and eco-tourism initiatives can ensure that Cox's Bazar's development does not compromise its natural beauty

7. Policy and Legal Frameworks

A conducive policy environment is vital to attract foreign direct investment (FDI) in aviation, tourism, and the gaming industry. Streamlining processes for investment approvals, ensuring political stability, and protecting investor rights are key measures to foster stakeholder confidence.

8. International Collaboration and Funding

Collaboration with international organizations and development banks can provide funding and technical expertise for large-scale infrastructure projects. Public-private partnerships (PPPs) are another effective mechanism to share the financial burden while benefiting from private sector efficiency and innovation.

By implementing these recommendations, Cox's Bazar can harness its strategic location, natural assets, and economic potential to become a leading international air transport and casino hub in the Asia-Pacific region. Sustainable practices, targeted marketing, and strategic partnerships are key to achieving this vision.

6.0 CONCLUSION

Cox's Bazar possesses the potential to emerge as a significant international air transport and casino hub within the Asia Pacific region. With its untouched coastline, growing tourism infrastructure, and strategic geographical location, the region offers unparalleled opportunities for economic growth and global connectivity. However, realizing this potential requires a multi-faceted approach encompassing strategic policy development, robust infrastructure enhancements, and targeted investment initiatives. Policy reforms must prioritize the creation of transparent regulatory frameworks to govern both the air transport and casino industries, ensuring compliance with international standards and fostering investor confidence. Tourism promotion efforts and public-private partnerships will be critical in enhancing Cox's Bazar's global profile as a premium destination. On the infrastructure front, the modernization of Cox's Bazar Airport, the development of integrated transport networks, and the establishment of world-class casinos and resorts are essential for attracting international travelers and investors. Concurrently, investment strategies focused on foreign direct investment, private sector engagement, and sustainability initiatives will provide the financial foundation necessary for long-term development.

Cox's Bazar can transform into a dynamic air transport and tourism hub by aligning policy, infrastructure, and investment efforts. Such development would bolster Bangladesh's economy and position the country as a significant player in the Asia Pacific region. With a coordinated vision and sustained commitment, Cox's Bazar can achieve its potential as a gateway for international commerce, entertainment, and tourism.

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