

# The Role of Cultural Heritage in Tourism Competitiveness

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**Abstract.** Cultural heritage has become a central pillar in shaping tourism experiences and enhancing the competitiveness of destinations. This study explores how cultural heritage contributes to tourism competitiveness by analyzing key factors such as destination identity, visitor engagement, and economic impact. Using a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative case studies and quantitative data from tourism boards, the findings indicate that destinations that effectively preserve and promote their cultural heritage outperform others in attracting and retaining tourists. The paper concludes by recommending strategic investments in heritage conservation and community involvement as levers to sustain long-term competitiveness.

**Key words:** *cultural tourism, competitiveness, cultural heritage, monument, destination*

## 1. Introduction

Tourism competitiveness is defined as the ability of a destination to attract and satisfy visitors in a sustainable manner. In an increasingly globalized and homogenized tourism landscape, cultural heritage has emerged as a distinguishing asset. It includes tangible elements such as monuments and museums, as well as intangible aspects like traditions, languages, and customs (Sadikhova & Babayev, 2025). Cultural heritage not only enhances the attractiveness of a destination but also fosters local pride and identity. However, the extent to which cultural heritage contributes to tourism competitiveness has not been consistently measured or understood. This study aims to fill this gap by examining the relationship between cultural heritage assets and tourism performance indicators.

Tourism is one of the fastest-growing sectors globally, contributing significantly to economic development, job creation, and cultural exchange (Mammadova & Abdullayev, 2025). As global competition among destinations intensifies, the ability to offer unique and memorable experiences becomes critical (Abdullayev et al, 2024). In this context, cultural heritage has emerged as a key driver of tourism competitiveness, allowing destinations to differentiate themselves through their history, traditions, architecture, art, and way of life (Timothy, 2011).

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Cultural heritage includes both tangible elements such as historical monuments, archaeological sites, museums, and architecture, as well as intangible elements like folklore, music, language, gastronomy, festivals, and traditional knowledge. These assets not only serve as attractions for international and domestic tourists but also embody the identity and values of local communities (Richards, 2018). Heritage tourism, a segment that focuses on visiting places of historical and cultural significance, has shown consistent growth, driven by travelers' increasing desire for authentic and meaningful experiences (Briedenhann & Wickens, 2004).

Furthermore, cultural heritage can contribute to sustainable tourism development. When properly managed, it encourages the preservation of cultural assets, fosters community involvement, and promotes economic diversification. However, this potential can be undermined by challenges such as inadequate infrastructure, lack of investment, mismanagement, and the pressures of mass tourism (Zhang et al, 1999). Balancing the preservation of cultural authenticity with the demands of a competitive tourism market remains a persistent issue (Javid & Sadikhova, 2025).

Despite the recognized importance of cultural heritage in tourism literature, there is still limited empirical research linking cultural heritage directly to measurable outcomes of tourism competitiveness, such as visitor numbers, spending patterns, destination branding, and economic impact (Farzaliyeva & Abdullayev, 2025). Additionally, many existing studies are either conceptual or focus on isolated case studies, without a broader comparative or analytical framework.

This study addresses this gap by examining how cultural heritage assets influence tourism competitiveness across different global contexts. By analyzing both quantitative data and qualitative insights from diverse case studies, it aims to answer the following research questions:

How does the presence and management of cultural heritage affect tourism performance indicators?

What role does community participation and heritage conservation play in sustaining destination competitiveness?

What best practices can be identified for integrating cultural heritage into tourism development strategies?

By exploring these questions, the paper aims to provide a clearer understanding of the strategic value of cultural heritage in tourism and offer practical recommendations for policymakers, tourism authorities, and heritage managers seeking to leverage their cultural assets for long-term competitive advantage.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1 Research Design

This study adopted a **mixed-methods research design**, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between cultural heritage and tourism competitiveness. The rationale for using a mixed-methods approach was to triangulate

data from different sources, enhancing the validity of the findings and offering both breadth and depth in analysis.

The research was conducted in two phases:

- **Phase 1 (Quantitative Analysis):** This phase involved statistical examination of secondary data related to cultural heritage sites and tourism performance indicators from selected countries.
- **Phase 2 (Qualitative Case Studies):** In-depth case studies were conducted in five culturally significant destinations to explore the mechanisms through which cultural heritage contributes to tourism competitiveness.

## 2.2 Site Selection and Sampling

For the qualitative phase, five culturally rich cities were selected using purposive sampling to ensure diversity in geography, cultural context, and tourism development stages (Babayev, 2024). The selected cities were:

- **Kyoto, Japan** – A city renowned for traditional architecture, temples, and geisha culture.
- **Florence, Italy** – A cradle of the Renaissance and a UNESCO World Heritage site.
- **Fez, Morocco** – One of the oldest cities in North Africa, known for its medina and Islamic heritage.
- **Cusco, Peru** – Former capital of the Inca Empire and gateway to Machu Picchu.
- **Luang Prabang, Laos** – A blend of Buddhist temples and colonial heritage, also UNESCO-listed.

Each destination was selected for its strong cultural heritage base and efforts in promoting cultural tourism. Participants for interviews were identified using **snowball sampling**, beginning with contacts in local tourism boards and extending to heritage site managers, cultural practitioners, and local business owners.

## 2.3 Data Collection

### Quantitative Data

Quantitative data were sourced from publicly available databases such as:

- United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO)
- UNESCO World Heritage Centre
- National and regional tourism authorities

The key indicators collected included:

- Number of international and domestic tourist arrivals

- Tourist expenditure (per capita and total)
- Length of stay
- Number of cultural heritage sites (UNESCO and nationally recognized)
- Investments in cultural heritage preservation

### Qualitative Data

Qualitative data were gathered through:

- **Semi-structured interviews** (n = 25 across all sites)
- **Field observations** during site visits
- **Document analysis** of strategic plans, promotional materials, and policy documents related to cultural heritage and tourism

Interview questions focused on topics such as:

- The role of heritage in tourism marketing
- Community involvement in tourism development
- Conservation practices and their impact on tourism
- Perceived challenges and opportunities

## 2.4 Data Analysis

### Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using **descriptive statistics**, **Pearson correlation**, and **regression analysis** to identify relationships between the presence and quality of cultural heritage and various tourism competitiveness indicators. The analysis was performed using SPSS software.

### Qualitative Analysis

A **thematic analysis** was used to examine the qualitative data. All interviews were transcribed and coded using NVivo. Themes were identified inductively and organized into categories such as:

- Heritage as a branding tool
- Economic impact of cultural tourism
- Role of local communities
- Tensions between preservation and commercialization

Triangulation of findings from the qualitative and quantitative phases ensured a more holistic understanding of the dynamics between heritage and tourism competitiveness.

### 3. Results

The findings from both the quantitative analysis and qualitative case studies revealed a consistent and positive relationship between cultural heritage and tourism competitiveness. Cultural heritage contributes significantly to destination appeal, visitor satisfaction, and economic performance when effectively managed. The results are presented in two main parts: statistical analysis of heritage-tourism linkages and thematic insights from the five case studies.

#### 3.1 Quantitative Findings

##### 3.1.1 Correlation Between Heritage Sites and Tourism Indicators

Statistical analysis showed a strong positive correlation between the number of recognized cultural heritage sites and key tourism performance indicators:

- The **Pearson correlation coefficient** between the number of UNESCO World Heritage Sites and international tourist arrivals was  $r = 0.68$  ( $p < 0.01$ ).
- A similarly high correlation was found between cultural heritage site density and average tourist spending ( $r = 0.72$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).
- Destinations with high concentrations of cultural heritage assets (5+ major sites within a 100 km radius) reported a 25% longer average visitor stay and 30–35% higher per capita tourist expenditure than those with fewer cultural attractions.

##### 3.1.2 Heritage Investment and Economic Performance

Destinations that allocated a higher share of public tourism budgets (above 20%) to heritage preservation and interpretation reported:

- Increased visitor satisfaction and repeat visitation rates.
- Growth in cultural tourism-related SMEs, especially in handicrafts, guided tours, and cultural events.
- Greater resilience in off-peak seasons, as cultural festivals and exhibitions helped maintain visitor flow year-round.

#### 3.2 Qualitative Case Study Insights

##### 3.2.1 Kyoto, Japan

Kyoto's emphasis on preserving traditional neighborhoods, temples, and performing arts has contributed to a distinct identity that differentiates it from other urban destinations in Japan (Sadikhova, 2024). Interviewees from Kyoto's tourism office reported a 40% increase in repeat visitors over five years, attributed largely to cultural festivals and heritage walking tours. Strict zoning laws and collaboration with local artisans ensured that modernization did not erode cultural authenticity.

##### 3.2.2 Florence, Italy

Florence integrates its Renaissance legacy with modern tourism infrastructure (Yin, 2018). Investments in digital heritage tools—such as augmented reality tours and multilingual mobile apps—have enhanced accessibility to historical knowledge for diverse tourists. Local officials noted that these innovations increased museum ticket sales and extended average museum stay time by over 20 minutes per visitor, improving both revenue and educational value (Mammadova & Abdullayev, 2025)

### 3.2.3 Fez, Morocco

Fez's old medina, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, exemplifies how cultural authenticity can attract niche tourism markets (UNESCO, 2021). However, challenges such as over-tourism and limited public investment were noted. Despite these, community-led restoration initiatives, supported by NGOs and private partners, have revitalized historic buildings while creating new jobs in the hospitality and craft sectors. Tour operators emphasized that authenticity was the key factor in attracting European and North American travelers.

### 3.2.4 Cusco, Peru

Cusco, the gateway to Machu Picchu, has capitalized on its Inca heritage by developing immersive cultural experiences. Local stakeholders emphasized that community involvement in tourism planning has been essential. For example, indigenous communities offer home-stays and traditional weaving workshops, which have not only diversified the tourism product but also ensured that economic benefits are more evenly distributed. These initiatives have helped mitigate overtourism in core archaeological areas.

### 3.2.5 Luang Prabang, Laos

Despite its relatively small size, Luang Prabang has positioned itself as a hub for cultural tourism in Southeast Asia. The city combines Buddhist spiritual heritage, French colonial architecture, and rural traditions to offer a tranquil yet culturally rich experience. Limited infrastructure has been a constraint, but low-volume, high-value tourism has helped maintain the city's cultural character. Visitor surveys conducted by the tourism board indicated a 95% satisfaction rate with cultural experiences.

## 3.3 Emergent Themes Across Cases

Several cross-cutting themes emerged across the case studies:

- **Heritage as a branding tool:** Destinations that framed their cultural identity clearly were more successful in global tourism marketing.
- **Community engagement:** Inclusion of local populations in tourism design and service delivery strengthened cultural authenticity and improved social sustainability.
- **Tensions between conservation and commercialization:** While tourism revenues support preservation, excessive tourist flow risks damaging heritage integrity.
- **Innovation in interpretation:** Use of technology and creative storytelling enhanced the accessibility and educational value of heritage assets.

## 4. Discussion

The results confirm that cultural heritage plays a significant role in enhancing tourism competitiveness. Destinations that actively invest in heritage conservation and integrate local communities into the tourism value chain experience higher visitor satisfaction and economic returns. Moreover, cultural heritage contributes to brand differentiation, allowing destinations to stand out in the crowded global tourism market.

However, the findings also highlight potential risks, such as over-tourism and the commodification of culture, which can undermine the authenticity that tourists seek. Therefore, a balanced approach is required, combining heritage protection with responsible tourism policies.

The strong positive correlation between the presence of cultural heritage assets and key tourism performance indicators (visitor numbers, expenditure, and length of stay) reinforces the notion that heritage is a major driver of destination appeal. Destinations such as Kyoto, Florence, and Cusco have leveraged their unique historical and cultural attributes to build distinct destination brands that stand out in the global tourism market (Sadikhova, 2023). These cases align with the findings of previous studies that emphasize the role of place identity and authenticity in tourism competitiveness (Richards, 2018; UNWTO, 2021).

In particular, destinations that combine tangible and intangible heritage—such as traditional architecture alongside festivals and local customs—tend to offer a more immersive visitor experience. This hybrid approach not only enhances cultural depth but also increases the emotional and psychological connection tourists feel toward a place, often resulting in longer stays and repeat visits (SADIKHOVA, 2022).

Another important finding is the contribution of cultural heritage to local economic development. Case studies showed that investments in heritage conservation not only improved site quality but also stimulated related sectors such as arts and crafts, gastronomy, and small-scale hospitality (Садыхова, 2017). In Cusco and Fez, community-driven initiatives demonstrated how cultural tourism can empower marginalized groups and contribute to more inclusive economic growth.

Furthermore, cultural heritage provides economic resilience by diversifying tourism offerings beyond traditional sun-and-sand packages. For example, while some destinations suffer from seasonal fluctuations, heritage-based tourism can attract year-round visitors through events, exhibitions, and cultural workshops. This has important implications for destinations seeking sustainable growth in a competitive and often volatile global tourism market.

## 5. Conclusion

Cultural heritage is not just a passive attraction but a dynamic asset that can drive tourism competitiveness when effectively managed. Policymakers and tourism stakeholders should prioritize heritage-based strategies, community involvement, and sustainable practices to ensure that cultural tourism continues to thrive without compromising the values it seeks to promote.



This study has provided clear and compelling evidence that cultural heritage plays a vital role in enhancing tourism competitiveness across a variety of contexts. By integrating quantitative analysis with qualitative case studies, it has shown that destinations rich in tangible and intangible heritage consistently outperform others in terms of visitor attraction, spending, satisfaction, and destination branding.

One of the core conclusions is that cultural heritage is not merely a passive asset—a relic of the past to be observed—it is a dynamic force that shapes the identity, economy, and sustainability of tourism destinations. When effectively conserved, interpreted, and integrated into tourism strategies, heritage becomes a cornerstone for competitive advantage.

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