

SPIRITUAL AND CULTURAL TOURISM OPPORTUNITIES IN THE SI THEP DISTRICT, PHETCHABUN, THAILAND

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Abstract:

This research delves into the complex spiritual and cultural tourism dynamics in Si Thep District. It explores the significance of this form of tourism and the interplay between tourist experiences, community involvement, sustainability practices, and destination promotion. The study establishes a foundation by examining the factors influencing spiritual tourism, including authentic experiences, cultural attractions, sustainable practices, and effective destination marketing. The study takes place in Si Thep District, a rich cultural and spiritual heritage locale. The research aims to determine the critical elements contributing to the success of spiritual and cultural tourism destinations. It uses a mixed-methods approach, including surveys, interviews, and on-site observations, to dissect visitor satisfaction, community perceptions, sustainability initiatives, and the impact of digital marketing on destination promotion. The findings highlight the critical role of community engagement in sustaining tourism. They shed light on the delicate balance between cultural preservation and tourism-driven development. Moreover, the study evaluates the environmental implications of tourism activities, offering insights into the efficacy of existing sustainability practices. It examines the influence of digital marketing channels, emphasising the importance of online presence in shaping tourists' perceptions and choices. The research also explores avenues for future growth, suggesting areas for infrastructure development, community empowerment, and crisis resilience. By synthesising these diverse elements, this research offers a nuanced understanding of the spiritual and cultural tourism landscape in Si Thep District. It presents practical implications for policymakers, local communities, and tourism stakeholders. The study invites future research avenues to enhance cultural tourism destinations' sustainability and resilience.

Keywords: Spiritual tourism, cultural tourism, Si Thep, Phetchabun, Thailand

1. INTRODUCTION

According to Christou et al. (2023) and Muhamad and Sopjan (2022), young people are increasingly interested in spiritual and cultural tourism. This type of travel involves visiting sacred sites, practising meditation, and interacting with nature. To promote this sector, efficient marketing methods are necessary. Enterprises in this sector can effectively open doors by understanding the demands and expectations of the target market and adopting practical marketing strategies (Madden & Thongnueakhaeng, 2022). Factors such as service rates, human resources, security, transportation, and facilities must also be considered to

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ensure a positive tourist experience. Retreats, ashrams, monasteries, or temples in natural settings are frequently associated with this type of travel.

Chiang Mai is a popular spiritual tourism destination known for its Buddhist temples and cultural richness (Luekveerawattana & Sawangdee, 2021). Tourists visit Thailand to practice mindfulness for well-being (Choe & O'Regan, 2020) and appreciate cultural features like architecture and gastronomy. Sustainable tourism practices are crucial (Trupp, 2014) to preserve natural resources and ensure the survival of Thailand's tourist sites. The Lower Northern Region of Thailand, including Phetchabun, boasts diversified topography, demographics, and historical significance (Chulaphan & Barahona, 2021; Tourism Authority of Thailand, n.d.).

Phetchabun province, located in Thailand, spans an area of about 7.9 million rai. It is surrounded by mountains that cover around 40% of the total area, with a flat area in the middle. The main river, the Pasak River, flows from north to south and covers 350 kilometres before it flows into the Pasak Chonlasit Dam in Lopburi Province. The province comprises 11 districts, including Khao Kho, famous for its nature tourism, and Si Thep, which has several spiritual and cultural attractions, including Wat Phra That Pha Sorn Kaew (Phetchabun Provincial Office, n.d.).

Si Thep District, located in Thailand's northern region, is a historically and culturally significant area with a rich history dating back to the Khmer culture, civilisation, and the Lanna Kingdom (Kositanont, 2017; UNESCO World Heritage, n.d.). Si Thep Historical Park is home to important archaeological sites, including Khao Klang Nai and Khao Klang Nok (Fine Arts Department, 2022; Songsiri, 2016). Wat Phuttha Mahathammara, a giant Buddha statue, and Si Thep Historical Park are notable spiritual and cultural attractions in the area. Additionally, the blend of Mahayana Buddhism and Theravada mottos is a distinctive feature of Si Thep's society.

Si Thep district in Thailand is a unique and attractive destination for tourists and researchers, blending Mahayana Buddhism and Theravada mottos, significant archaeological sites, and vibrant festivals (Na Sonun Subdistrict Administration Organisation, 2023). The district hosts several traditional festivals, including the Bun Bang Fai Rocket Festival, which takes place every April or May, and the sacrifice ceremony of the godfather Si Thep, held at Si Thep Historical Park (Admin Phetchabunpao, 2020). Both events are deeply rooted in the district's rich history and religion and are believed to bring good luck and prosperity to the community.

Thailand is home to several cultural and natural landmarks, six designated as UNESCO World Heritage Sites, with seven others on the tentative list. These popular tourist attractions are recognised for their unique cultural, natural, artistic, and historical significance and have been protected for future generations. The group of archaeological sites in Si Thep district was recently registered as Thailand's New World Heritage Site in 2023, following the footsteps of the Prasat Phanom Rung Temple Group, Prasat Muang Low and Prasat Plai Bad, Buriram Province, which have been certified as UNESCO World Cultural Heritage Sites (The Government Public Relations Department, 2020; Bangkokbiznews, 2023).

Si Thep District in Thailand has untapped tourism potential, with lower visitor numbers than other popular destinations. Though there has been a gradual increase in tourist numbers, there is still room for expansion (Ministry of Tourism & Sports, 2022). In 2022, the number of tourists visiting Phetchabun province was 2,199,089, predominantly Thai tourists (2,161,631) and foreigners (37,458). Tourist activity in Phetchabun province is concentrated

in specific areas such as the Sea of Mist, Khao Takien-Ngo, and Wat Kong Niam viewpoints, as well as Phu Tab Berk, all of which are accessible year-round. However, visitors mostly arrive from July to August and October to November (Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT), 2020).

Si Thep district in Thailand's northern region has culturally significant archaeological sites, making it an attractive destination for tourists and researchers. However, it receives fewer visitors than more well-known tourist destinations in Thailand. The recent registration of the group of archaeological sites in Si Thep district as Thailand's New World Heritage Site in 2023 may help to promote its tourism industry. This research aims to identify and promote the tourist prospects in the Si Thep district, emphasising spiritual and cultural themes while conserving its cultural and spiritual identity.

The Si Thep District has excellent potential for spiritual and cultural tourism but needs comprehensive studies and statistics. Understanding the area's cultural assets is essential for crafting sustainable tourism policies. The district's cultural heritage and stunning landscapes can lead to economic growth with thoughtful planning. This research aims to uncover opportunities and suggest strategies for the responsible and sustainable growth of tourism in the district.

2. OBJECTIVES

2.1. To evaluate the spiritual and cultural resources in Si Thep District.

The objective is to evaluate Si Thep District's spiritual and cultural richness comprehensively. This involves meticulously examining historical sites, temples, festivals, and all other factors contributing to the area's cultural identity. The assessment aims to understand the district's cultural landscape profoundly, identifying essential elements that draw tourists and contribute to the locals' cultural legacy.

2.2. To identify the potential for sustainable tourism growth in Si Thep District.

This objective identifies and evaluates potential sustainable tourism practices in Si Thep District. This involves carefully examining the current tourism activities and evaluating their impact on the environment, society and economy. Through this analysis, the objective is to uncover opportunities for sustainable tourism practices to ensure the well-being of the local communities, environment, and tourism industry in the long run. Ultimately, the goal is to recommend strategies that align with sustainable principles and facilitate the development of responsible tourism practices.

2.3. To suggest methods for fostering religious and cultural travel and propose strategies for promoting spiritual and cultural tourism in Si Thep District.

The objective is to develop successful tactics for boosting spiritual and cultural tourism in Si Thep District. By evaluating its cultural resources and potential for sustainability, the study aspires to suggest feasible ideas for advertising and endorsing the region as an exceptional spot. This entails examining possibilities for online marketing, engaging the community, and collaborating with players in the tourism industry. Ultimately, the aim is to elevate the profile of Si Thep District and appeal to a broad spectrum of visitors seeking cultural and spiritual experiences.

3. LITERATURE REVIEWS

Spiritual tourism is a growing industry that explores spiritual beliefs and practices through travel to various locations and related activities (Asthana & Valeri, 2023). Despite its popularity, the concept is still nascent, with ongoing research exploring its many facets and implications. Previous research has identified factors affecting spiritual tourism consumption, including visitors' spiritual level, marketing, demographics, and destination appeal. Additionally, Giri (2023) investigated the prerequisites for establishing spiritual tourism in various locations, considering service costs, human resources, security, transportation, and facilities. Spiritual tourism is recognised for its socio-economic benefits to local communities and for enhancing tourists' spiritual lives. Overall, it is an exclusive social activity that reflects humanity's enduring quest for spiritual enlightenment through travel.

Spiritual tourism has gained popularity as a means to reconnect with spirituality, experience new cultures, and immerse oneself in nature (Wang et al., 2023; Rohman et al., 2023; Abdul Halim et al., 2021). This form of tourism enables individuals to pursue spiritual growth and transformative experiences that transcend religious boundaries. Spiritual tourism also promotes cultural interaction, dialogue, and understanding by engaging with various forms of spirituality, faiths, and cultures while respecting local traditions, values, and heritage, thereby contributing to the viability of visited sites. From an economic perspective, spiritual tourism can generate revenue, create jobs, and prevent migration in rural areas (Cugini, 2021; Sharpley & Jepson, 2011). Hence, by sustainably utilising natural and cultural resources, spiritual tourism can benefit individuals, communities, and destinations.

Spiritual tourism is a sustainable form that preserves cultural and natural assets, offering unique opportunities for spiritual growth (Su, 2018). "Religious light tourism" has contributed to a location's financial and cultural growth in Europe (Lee et al., 2022). To ensure sustainable planning and development, conserving agricultural and historical tourism resources is essential, as cultural worldviews and sustainable intelligence influence decision-making (Chang & Chuang, 2021). According to Atef (2021), incorporating intangible and natural heritage attractions into tour itineraries and promoting spiritual tourism are crucial aspects of sustainable tourism planning and development. Doing so can preserve and promote cultural and natural assets, benefit local communities and economies, and protect these valuable assets for future generations.

According to Brian and Kurniawan (2023), the success of spiritual and cultural tourism destinations depends on attractiveness, pricing, amenities, service quality, spiritual values, cultural significance, and film components. Huang et al. (2019) and Lao et al. (2023) suggest that a place's cultural significance and spiritual values are crucial in attracting visitors. Additionally, the quality of the destination's facilities and services is equally essential (Malik, 2020). Incorporating film elements into the tourist experience can enhance the cultural background and contribute to the destination's success (Widodo, 2020).

The success of spiritual and cultural tourism destinations is attributed to significant attractions, availability of authentic experiences, development of sustainable tourism practices, and promotion of the destination to the target market (Zulfaqar et al., 2023). Factors critical for growth include service costs, human resources, security, environmental preservation, transportation, and facilities (Areola & Trinidad III, 2022; Lin & Hsu, 2022). Existential authenticity, object-based authenticity, place connection, and support for sustainable development are crucial for success (Terzic et al., 2015).

According to Chavan and Bhola (2013), the district's tourist infrastructure needs to be improved, but it also needs modernization to meet the growing number of visitors. The current facilities could be more evenly dispersed and require improvements in city highways, traffic management, public utilities, parking facilities, cleanliness, and road and signpost quality

(Stasac et al., 2020). Additionally, there is a demand for sustainable and energy-efficient lodging solutions that provide comfort while consuming the least energy (Lone et al., 2013). Rural infrastructure development is critical for managing ecotourism and inclusive growth, including waste management, disaster protection, and road and communication infrastructure enhancement. Ultimately, repairing and improving the tourist infrastructure is crucial to meeting tourist needs and expectations and ensuring a great visiting experience (Whitman et al., 2013).

3.1 The presence of significant spiritual or cultural attractions

According to Griffiths and Wiltshier's (2019) study, authentic and culturally relevant spiritual or cultural attractions play a significant role in attracting tourists to a destination. Cultural and spiritual qualities have been integrated into national and international tourist circuits due to their increasing importance in the global tourism industry (Gozner et al., 2016). Shahzalal's (2022) research on tourist motivations and attractions suggests that marketing appeals align with existing models. Shaykh-Baygloo's (2021) study presents a structural model that highlights the positive impact of interests on the importance of the site and the mediating role of a sense of place in the relationship between interests and satisfaction, emphasising the connections between attractions, sense of place, and satisfaction.

3.2 The availability of authentic experiences

Tourism based on cultural and spiritual interests is rising, with travellers seeking authentic experiences to learn about local communities and gain cultural insights (Shelley-Anne, 2022). Authentic experiences, including participating in local traditions and activities, can foster tourists' loyalty and attachment to rural tourism destinations (Wang et al., 2022). Creating memorable cultural tourism experiences depends on authenticity, engagement, culinary allure, atmospherics, and quality of service (Saleem & Umar, 2022). The authenticity of traditional village cultural landscapes is a significant driver of tourists' behavioural intentions (Li & Wang, 2023). Cultivating existential and object-based authenticity can positively impact visitors' place attachment and support sustainable development in cultural tourism destinations (Song & Kim, 2022).

3.3 The development of sustainable tourism practices

In promoting sustainable tourism, it is necessary to implement conservation and preservation measures, collaborate with stakeholders, and consider tourism's economic, social, and environmental dimensions (Kim, 2023). Adopting 3Rs practices (reduce, reuse, and recycle) is also crucial (Sadykov et al., 2023). Moreover, Koliousska and Andreopoulou (2023) suggest evaluating a destination's tourism potential and factoring in its ecological possibilities to balance the influx of tourists and the destination's carrying capacity. Tourists can also contribute to sustainable tourism by being mindful of the impact of their behaviour and modifying it to reduce adverse effects (Bozdoglar, 2023).

3.4 The promotion of the destination to the target market

The successful promotion of a destination to its target market is critical to attracting tourists (Zhang et al., 2022). DMOs increasingly use experiential marketing on their websites to create positive pre-travel online destination experiences (ODEs) (Köchling, 2021; Al-Bourini et al., 2021). However, the effectiveness of additional complex multi-media elements is limited (Cavlak, 2021). Online word-of-mouth and social media also play significant roles in tourism destination marketing (Femenia-Serra & Gretzel, 2019). The coordination,

planning, and promotion of a destination are typically the responsibility of a public or private sector organisation.

The factors that play a significant role in attracting tourists to a destination include the presence of authentic spiritual or cultural attractions, the availability of authentic experiences that allow tourists to engage with local communities, the adoption of sustainable tourism practices, and the successful promotion of the destination to its target market.

Various channels, such as online marketing and travel trade shows, can be utilised to promote a destination. Destination Marketing Organisations (DMOs) increasingly use experiential marketing on their websites to generate positive pre-travel online destination experiences. Effective online and positive word-of-mouth management is also crucial in tourism destination marketing.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study used quantitative and qualitative data collection methods to explore factors influencing tourist behaviour and cultural and spiritual tourism experiences in the Si Thep district. The quantitative data was gathered by surveying 200 tourists (tourist preferences and satisfaction) and residents. In contrast, the qualitative data was collected through interviews with 30 key informants (residents, cultural experts, and tourists) and participant observation of spiritual and cultural activities (site visits and observations of cultural and spiritual sites) between November and December 2022 and May and June 2023.

The survey and interviews aimed to investigate the reasons for visiting the district's cultural and spiritual attractions and suggestions for enhancing the destination. The qualitative data was analysed using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and patterns related to cultural and spiritual tourism experiences. The survey data was analysed using statistical software such as SPSS, with descriptive statistics used to summarise demographic information and regression analysis (inferential analysis) to identify the factors influencing tourist behaviour—respect for local culture and customs, informed consent, and privacy. The study provides a deeper understanding of the experiences of tourists and the cultural and spiritual factors that influence their behaviour, and it offers recommendations for promoting the destination.

5. RESULTS

The research on spiritual and cultural tourism in Si Thep District conducted 30 in-depth interviews with primary vital informants, including residents, tourists, local authorities, and community leaders. Si Thep District is culturally and spiritually rich. Residents are deeply connected to the district due to family traditions and long-term residency. They view historic temples and traditional festivals as significant cultural and spiritual assets. The impact of tourism is mixed, with some acknowledging the economic benefits while others express concerns about changes to their community. Preserving cultural practices is essential, and residents suggest promoting traditional dance performances and workshops and participating in tourism-related activities with training and financial incentives.

Tourism in Si Thep District is popular due to its cultural and spiritual heritage. Tourists report positive experiences at Wat Si Thep and during traditional festivals. The locals are known for their warm hospitality and authenticity. However, overcrowding and littering are challenges that need to be addressed. Tourists have given feedback on needing more English information, better site maintenance during peak seasons, and more educational programmes

on local customs and environmental conservation. Si Thep District has the potential for cultural and spiritual heritage tourism but can improve crowd management, environmental protection, and information provision. By listening to tourists' feedback, Si Thep District can attract visitors while promoting responsible tourism practices.

5.1 Role of Cultural and Spiritual Tourism for Local Authorities and Community Leaders

Local authorities and community leaders discussed the importance of cultural tourism for economic growth and preserving heritage. They acknowledged the challenge of balancing growth and cultural identity but recognised sustainable development and collaboration opportunities. They emphasised community participation in eco-friendly initiatives and prioritised balancing economic benefits and cultural preservation while improving the visitor experience. The study analysed 200 respondents based on gender, age, occupation, and nationality—55% identified as female, 28% as male, and 17% as other gender identities. Most respondents were aged between 26 and 45, with 61% employed. Thai nationals accounted for 48.5% of the respondents, followed by 14% from other ASEAN countries.

Table 1: Overall tourist behaviours

| | Purpose of visit | How did you hear about Si Thep District as a destination? | How many times have you visited Si Thep District? | Duration of your stay in Si Thep District | Which cultural or spiritual sites have you visited in Si Thep District? | What cultural or spiritual activities have you participated in during your visit? |
|-----------------|-------------------------------|---|---|---|---|---|
| Mean | 3.06 | 2.48 | 1.88 | 1.60 | 2.44 | 3.25 |
| Median | 3.00 | 3.00 | 2.00 | 1.00 | 2.00 | 3.00 |
| Mode | Cultural/Heritage Exploration | Social media | 2-3 times | Less than 2 days | Ancient ruins and artefacts | Attending local festivals or ceremonies |
| Std Dev | 1.31 | 1.07 | .85 | .78 | 1.23 | 1.15 |
| Variance | 1.72 | 1.15 | .72 | .60 | 1.52 | 1.33 |

Based on the results from surveyed tourists in Table 1, their primary interest in Si Thep District is cultural and spiritual exploration. The average purpose of visit score was 3.06, with a median score of 3.00, indicating that "Cultural/Heritage exploration" is the most common reason for visiting. Regarding learning about Si Thep District, social media is the most popular source for tourists, with a median score of 3.00 and an average score of 2.48. On average, tourists visit Si Thep District almost twice, with an average score of 1.88. The median value of 2.00 suggests that the most common number of visits reported is "2-3 times."

Tourists' stays in Si Thep District are relatively short, with an average duration of 1.60. The mode value for this question is "Less than 2 days," as indicated by the median score of 1.00. Visiting cultural or spiritual sites is a moderately popular activity among tourists, with an average score of 2.44. The mode value 2.00 suggests that "Ancient ruins and artefacts" is the most common response. Lastly, tourists have participated in a relatively high number of

cultural or spiritual activities during their visit, with an average score of 3.25. The mode value for this question is "Attending local festivals or ceremonies," as indicated by the median score of 3.00.

Tourists and visitors to Si Thep District, Phetchabun, Thailand, have a variety of reasons for their travels. These reasons include leisure (16.5%), religious purposes (12.0%), cultural and heritage exploration (38.5%), studies and research (19.5%), food and culinary exploration (9.5%), and other unique reasons (4.0%). The largest category of visitors are those interested in exploring the cultural and heritage sites of the area and learning about its rich history and traditions. Others may be seeking relaxation, attending religious ceremonies, conducting academic research, or exploring the local food scene. The "other" category encompasses visitors with purposes not covered by the previous categories, such as business travellers or family visits.

The findings indicate how people discovered Si Thep District as a potential tourist spot. Notably, 22.5% of participants came across Si Thep District through Online Travel Platforms like TripAdvisor, which provide travel information and reviews. Many respondents (25.5%) learned about Si Thep District from friends and family who recommended it. Additionally, many (38.0%) found out about Si Thep District through social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter, where they came across posts, photos, or travel-related content shared by others. Some (10.0%) heard about Si Thep District through travel agencies, which played a role in promoting the district. Finally, a few respondents discovered Si Thep District through sources not covered in the previous categories, such as travel articles, magazines, or local events.

These figures provide valuable insights into how people were introduced to Si Thep District as a tourist destination. They emphasise the significance of online platforms, social networks, personal recommendations, and travel agencies in promoting tourism in the district.

The results from the survey on tourists' frequency, duration, and activities during their visits to Si Thep District. According to the data, out of 200 respondents, 38.0% visited the district for the first time, while 41.5% visited 2-3 times, 15.5% visited 4-5 times, and 5.0% visited more than 5 times. Additionally, most respondents (56.5%) stayed in Si Thep District for less than 2 days, 29.5% stayed for 2-4 days, 12.0% for 5-7 days, and only 2.0% stayed for more than 7 days.

Regarding cultural and spiritual sites visited, the data shows that ancient ruins and artefacts were the most popular, with 51.0% of respondents visiting them. Temples and monasteries were visited by 17.5% of respondents, while traditional festivals and ceremonies were attended by 15.0% of participants. Local arts and crafts and scenic natural attractions were visited by 7.0% and 6.0% of respondents, respectively. Other sites were visited by 3.5% of respondents.

Regarding cultural and spiritual activities, attending local festivals or ceremonies was the most popular, with 39.5% of respondents participating. Shopping for local crafts and souvenirs was the second most popular activity, with 26.0% of respondents engaging in it. 16.0% of respondents attended cultural workshops or demonstrations, while 6.5% participated in meditation or prayer sessions. 7.5% of respondents undertook nature walks or hikes, while 4.5% participated in other activities.

Table 2: Tourists’ Opinions on Visiting Si Thep District by Gender Factors

| Factors | Gender | | | | | | t | Sig |
|--|-----------|------|-----------|------|-----------|------|-------|------|
| | Male | | Female | | Other | | | |
| | \bar{x} | SD | \bar{x} | SD | \bar{x} | SD | | |
| Satisfaction with the cultural and spiritual experiences in Si Thep District. | 3.75 | 1.01 | 3.59 | 1.03 | 3.59 | 1.23 | -0.81 | .418 |
| The transportation facilities in Si Thep District. | 1.89 | .82 | 1.85 | .88 | 1.97 | .76 | .31 | .754 |
| Accommodation options in Si Thep District. | 3.62 | .86 | 3.36 | .95 | 3.41 | 1.05 | -1.27 | .205 |
| Access information about the cultural and spiritual sites in Si Thep District. | 3.45 | 1.25 | 3.36 | 1.24 | 3.47 | 1.16 | -0.01 | .994 |
| Interact with the local community during your visit. | 2.98 | 1.17 | 2.77 | 1.19 | 3.00 | 1.07 | -0.17 | .865 |
| The visit contributed positively to the local community. | 3.41 | 1.14 | 3.80 | 1.13 | 3.76 | 1.28 | 1.66 | .098 |

The figures in Table 2 compare tourist satisfaction levels and perceptions of various aspects of tourism in Si Thep District. The statistics show the average satisfaction scores for males, females, and others, along with their standard deviations. Additionally, they include t-statistics and p-values that determine the statistical significance of the differences between genders.

The text discusses the satisfaction levels of tourists with cultural and spiritual experiences, as well as their perceptions of transportation facilities, accommodation options, and access to information about cultural and spiritual sites in Si Thep District. The t-statistics suggest slight differences in perceptions among gender categories, but the p-values indicate that these differences are not statistically significant. Specifically, the t-statistic of -0.81 suggests a slight difference in satisfaction scores among gender categories, the t-statistic of 0.31 indicates no significant difference in perception of transportation facilities, the t-statistic of -1.27 implies a slight difference in perceptions of accommodation options, and the t-statistic of -0.01 indicates virtually no difference in gender perceptions of access to information.

The tourists interact with the local community while visiting the Si Thep District. The t-statistic of -0.17 shows no significant difference in perceptions of interaction with the local community among the genders, as supported by the p-value of 0.865. Finally, the tourists' perceptions regarding the positive contribution of their visit to the local community in Si Thep District. The t-statistic of 1.66 indicates a moderate difference in perceptions, with females having slightly higher scores than males and others. However, this difference is not statistically significant at a conventional significance level, as the p-value is 0.098.

Table 3 revealed that visitors' satisfaction scores vary across age groups. The 18–25 age group had the highest satisfaction score (mean = 4.00), while the 36–45 age group had the highest satisfaction with transportation facilities (mean = 2.16). The differences in satisfaction levels among age groups were not statistically significant (Sig = 0.083 > 0.05), but the

differences in satisfaction with transportation facilities were significant ($Sig = 0.029 < 0.05$), indicating a need for further investigation.

Table 3: Tourist’s Opinions on Visiting in Si Thep District by Age Factors

| Factors | Age | | | | | | | | | | f | Sig |
|--|-----------|------|-----------|------|-----------|------|-----------|------|-----------|------|------|------|
| | 18-25 | | 26-35 | | 36-45 | | 46-55 | | 56> | | | |
| | \bar{x} | SD | \bar{x} | SD | \bar{x} | SD | \bar{x} | SD | \bar{x} | SD | | |
| Satisfaction with the cultural and spiritual experiences in Si Thep District. | 4.00 | .91 | 3.70 | .99 | 3.56 | 1.03 | 3.29 | 1.19 | 3.50 | 1.26 | 2.10 | .083 |
| The transportation facilities in Si Thep District. | 1.91 | .82 | 1.67 | .70 | 2.16 | .92 | 1.81 | .91 | 1.88 | .81 | 2.75 | .029 |
| Accommodation options in Si Thep District. | 3.40 | .74 | 3.44 | .95 | 3.64 | .91 | 3.19 | 1.05 | 3.38 | 1.20 | 1.16 | .330 |
| Access information about the cultural and spiritual sites in Si Thep District. | 3.00 | 1.35 | 3.46 | 1.19 | 3.35 | 1.19 | 3.81 | 1.17 | 3.50 | 1.15 | 1.91 | .110 |
| Interact with the local community during your visit. | 2.51 | 1.25 | 3.08 | 1.18 | 2.80 | 1.10 | 3.03 | 1.20 | 2.75 | 1.00 | 1.58 | .181 |
| The visit contributed positively to the local community. | 3.34 | 1.26 | 3.65 | 1.15 | 3.76 | 1.15 | 4.00 | 1.10 | 3.69 | 1.14 | 1.40 | .234 |

The study found slight variation in perceptions of accommodation options across different age groups, with an F-value of 1.16 and a non-significant p-value of 0.330. On the other hand, there were variations in perceptions of access to information about cultural and spiritual sites among age groups, with the highest level of perception observed in the 46–55 age group (Mean = 3.81). However, the F-value of 1.91 suggests only some variation, and the p-value of 0.110 is not significant enough to indicate that age significantly influences perceptions of access to information.

Mean scores for interaction with the local community varied across age groups, with the highest level of interest seen in the 26–35 age group. However, the differences between age groups were not statistically significant. The mean scores for the contribution to the local community also varied across age groups, with the highest level of perception observed in the 46–55 age group. Age did not significantly influence these perceptions.

A study analysed the satisfaction levels of tourists from various nationalities in Si Thep District. The study found significant differences in satisfaction levels with transportation facilities and access to information about cultural and spiritual sites among the different nationalities. However, the satisfaction levels with other factors like cultural and spiritual experiences, accommodation options, interaction with the local community, and the visit's positive contribution to the local community were similar among the nationalities.

Middle Eastern (Table 4-5) visitors had the highest mean satisfaction level for cultural and spiritual experiences (3.91). 'Other' visitors had the highest mean satisfaction level for transportation facilities (2.33), while Asian Pacific visitors had the lowest (1.45). Satisfaction with transportation facilities varied significantly among different nationalities (F-value = 2.83, Sig = 0.005). However, the differences in satisfaction levels for cultural and spiritual experiences were not statistically significant (F-value = 1.96, Sig = 0.062).

Table 4: Tourist’s Opinions on Visiting in Si Thep District by Nationality Factors

| Factors | Nationality | | | | | | | | f | Sig |
|--|-------------|------|-----------|------|-----------|------|-----------|------|------|------|
| | Thai | | ASEAN | | European | | USA/Latin | | | |
| | \bar{x} | SD | \bar{x} | SD | \bar{x} | SD | \bar{x} | SD | | |
| Satisfaction with the cultural and spiritual experiences in Si Thep District. | 3.73 | .98 | 3.79 | 1.13 | 3.13 | .96 | 3.62 | .77 | 1.96 | .062 |
| The transportation facilities in Si Thep District. | 1.86 | .76 | 1.89 | .79 | 2.19 | .83 | 1.92 | .76 | 3.00 | .005 |
| Accommodation options in Si Thep District. | 3.28 | .94 | 3.25 | 1.04 | 3.69 | .70 | 3.69 | .85 | 1.78 | .093 |
| Access information about the cultural and spiritual sites in Si Thep District. | 3.47 | 1.23 | 3.61 | .99 | 2.31 | 1.20 | 4.08 | .86 | 2.92 | .006 |
| Interact with the local community during your visit. | 2.89 | 1.14 | 2.79 | 1.23 | 3.13 | 1.15 | 2.62 | 1.12 | .53 | .808 |
| The visit contributed positively to the local community. | 3.62 | 1.26 | 3.96 | .92 | 3.94 | 1.18 | 2.92 | 1.26 | 1.38 | .216 |

Accommodation satisfaction was highest for 'Other' visitors (mean = 4.00, SD = 1.12) and lowest for Thai visitors (mean = 3.28, SD = 0.94). Satisfaction with access to cultural and spiritual information was highest among USA/Latin visitors (mean = 4.08, SD = 0.86) and lowest among European visitors (mean = 2.31, SD = 1.20). Differences in satisfaction levels

among nationalities were not statistically significant for accommodation options ($F = 1.78$, $Sig = 0.093$) but significant for access to cultural and spiritual information ($F = 2.92$, $Sig = 0.006$).

The satisfaction level for interaction with the local community was highest for European visitors (mean = 3.13) and lowest for USA/Latin visitors (mean = 2.62). However, there is no significant difference among nationalities (F -value = 0.53, $Sig = 0.808$). The satisfaction level for the visit's positive contribution to the local community was highest for ASEAN and 'Other' visitors (mean = 3.96 and 3.89, respectively) and lowest for USA/Latin visitors (mean = 2.92). However, there is no significant difference among nationalities (F -value = 1.38, $Sig = 0.216$).

The study's findings provide valuable insights into the satisfaction levels of visitors from different nationalities with the cultural and tourism-related services in Si Thep District. The study suggests that the authorities should improve transportation facilities and access to information about cultural and spiritual sites to enhance visitors' satisfaction levels.

Table 5: Tourist’s Opinions on Visiting in Si Thep District by Nationality Factors (*Cont)

| Factors | Nationality | | | | | | | | f | Sig |
|--|-------------|------|-------|------|---------|------|-------|------|------|------|
| | Middle East | | Asian | | Pacific | | Other | | | |
| | Mean | SD | Mean | SD | Mean | SD | Mean | SD | | |
| Satisfaction with the cultural and spiritual experiences in Si Thep District. | 3.91 | 1.38 | 3.10 | 1.21 | 4.11 | .93 | 3.33 | 1.03 | 1.96 | .062 |
| The transportation facilities in Si Thep District. | 1.55 | .69 | 1.45 | .76 | 2.33 | 1.41 | 2.83 | .98 | 3.00 | .005 |
| Access information about the cultural and spiritual sites in Si Thep District. | 3.64 | .81 | 3.75 | .91 | 4.00 | 1.12 | 3.67 | .82 | 1.78 | .093 |
| Accommodation options in Si Thep District. | 3.27 | 1.10 | 3.40 | 1.35 | 3.00 | 1.22 | 3.67 | 1.37 | 2.92 | .006 |
| Interact with the local community during your visit. | 2.91 | 1.38 | 2.75 | 1.21 | 2.67 | 1.41 | 3.50 | .84 | .53 | .808 |
| The visit contributed positively to the local community. | 3.73 | 1.01 | 3.65 | .99 | 3.89 | .93 | 4.17 | 1.17 | 1.38 | .216 |

6. CONCLUSION

The research on spiritual and cultural tourism in Si Thep District has provided a comprehensive understanding of the perspectives of residents, tourists, local authorities, and community leaders. The findings have brought to light the cultural and spiritual richness of Si Thep District, emphasising its profound impact on residents. The residents hold diverse views on the implications of tourism, with deep connections to their heritage and viewing historic temples and traditional festivals as significant assets. While acknowledging the economic benefits of tourism, concerns about community changes exist. The residents actively engage with tourists, balancing economic opportunities with preserving cultural authenticity. They emphasise preserving cultural practices and suggest initiatives like traditional dance performances. Residents express interest in participating in tourism-related activities with proper training and financial incentives.

The tourists, attracted by Si Thep's cultural and spiritual heritage, report positive experiences, appreciating authenticity and local hospitality. However, overcrowding and littering exist, indicating the need for improved crowd management and environmental protection. Tourists provide constructive feedback, suggesting enhanced information provision in English and better site maintenance during peak seasons. Si Thep District has much to offer, but crowd management and environmental protection improvements can enhance its appeal.

The local authorities and community leaders recognise tourism's economic and cultural importance. They review ongoing initiatives, addressing challenges in managing tourism growth while preserving cultural identity. Leaders prioritise balancing economic benefits with cultural preservation by emphasising community participation, sustainable tourism strategies, and regional collaboration. The commitment to promoting cultural and spiritual tourism underscores the need for community involvement and eco-friendly practices.

The demographic analysis of 200 respondents reveals insights into gender, age, occupation, and nationality distribution. While gender distribution is relatively balanced, respondents span diverse age groups, with variations in occupation and nationality reflecting the global interest in Si Thep District. Tourists from different nationalities exhibit varying satisfaction levels, with significant differences in transportation facilities and access to information. While transportation and information provision improvements are suggested, overall satisfaction remains consistent across cultural experiences, accommodation, community interaction, and positive contributions.

6.1 Presence of Significant Spiritual or Cultural Attractions

According to research by Griffiths and Wiltshier (2019) and Gozner et al. (2016), tourist attractions must be genuine and culturally relevant to attract visitors. The study in Si Thep District validates this claim, highlighting that tourists are mainly attracted to the area due to its rich cultural and spiritual heritage. Historical temples, festivals, and traditional events are considered to be significant assets by both residents and tourists.

6.2 Availability of Authentic Experiences

The literature emphasises that people seeking spiritual and cultural tourism are often motivated by the desire to have authentic experiences (Wang et al., 2022; Shelley-Anne, 2022). This study supports this idea, as it found that tourists actively engage with local communities, participate in cultural events, and seek meaningful encounters beyond just

visiting conventional attractions. This emphasis on attending local festivals and ceremonies and participating in cultural activities aligns with the literature's focus on authenticity as a driver of tourist satisfaction and loyalty.

6.3 Development of Sustainable Tourism Practices

According to Kim (2023), sustainable tourism practices are emphasised in the literature as crucial for mitigating environmental impact and ensuring equitable distribution of benefits. The study aligns with this perspective, recognising the importance of balancing economic benefits with cultural preservation. The commitment of local authorities and community leaders to sustainable tourism strategies, eco-friendly initiatives, and collaboration with environmental organisations reflects a convergence with the literature's emphasis on the need for holistic sustainability.

6.4 Promotion of the Destination to the Target Market

The literature on destination promotion highlights its crucial role in driving tourism through various channels, such as online marketing and travel trade shows (Zhang et al., 2022; Köchling, 2021). This study aligns with the same view and sheds light on the factors influencing tourists' travel decisions, including social media, online travel platforms, and recommendations from friends and family. The study also highlights the importance of experiential marketing on destination websites and its impact on tourists' decision-making. The study's findings further reveal that tourists learn about Si Thep District through online platforms and social networks, highlighting the importance of a strong online presence of a destination for effective promotion.

6.5 Tourist Infrastructure Development

According to research conducted by Chavan and Bhola (2013) and Whitman et al. (2013), the development of tourist infrastructure plays a crucial role in enhancing visitors' overall experience. In line with this, the present study emphasises the importance of modernising and upgrading tourist infrastructure in Si Thep District. This includes improvements in highway systems, traffic management, public utilities, parking facilities, cleanliness, and the quality of roads and signposts. By addressing these aspects, visitors will have a more enjoyable and hassle-free experience, which can help boost regional tourism.

7. RECOMMENDATION

This study recommends enhancing transportation facilities and information access to improve visitor satisfaction. The commitment of local authorities and community leaders, coupled with residents' active involvement, is crucial for promoting sustainable cultural and spiritual tourism in Si Thep District. The findings provide valuable insights for academics, policymakers, and industry practitioners interested in promoting cultural tourism, sustainable development, and community participation.

Si Thep District is a destination with great spiritual and cultural tourism potential. Several areas can be explored to build upon the existing research and identify potential areas for further exploration. One of the critical areas that can be investigated is the satisfaction and experience of visitors to Si Thep District. This can be achieved by conducting surveys, interviews, or focus groups with tourists to understand their perceptions of the destination's

cultural and spiritual attractions, the authenticity of their experiences, and their overall satisfaction.

Another essential aspect that can be explored is the role of the local community in promoting and sustaining spiritual and cultural tourism. Community perceptions, involvement in tourism activities, and the impact of tourism on local traditions and lifestyles can be assessed to identify strategies for fostering positive community-tourism relationships. The sustainability practices implemented in Si Thep District and their effectiveness can also be evaluated. Opportunities for improvement and the environmental impact of tourism activities can be explored, considering the perspectives of tourists and local communities.

Strategies for cultural preservation and heritage management in Si Thep District can also be examined. This can involve investigating how cultural and historical sites are maintained, the role of local authorities in preserving cultural assets, and the challenges faced in heritage conservation. Recommendations for effective heritage management can be proposed based on the findings. The impact of digital marketing and online presence on destination promotion and the effectiveness of Si Thep District's online marketing strategies can be assessed. The role of Destination Marketing Organisations (DMOs) and opportunities for enhancing the digital promotion of the destination can also be identified.

Infrastructure development and tourism planning can be explored to understand their impact on tourism growth in Si Thep District. The effectiveness of ongoing infrastructure projects, their alignment with tourism needs, and the role of government and private sectors in infrastructure planning can be assessed. Recommendations for sustainable infrastructure development can be provided. Comparative studies with other spiritual and cultural tourism destinations can also be helpful. Si Thep District can be compared with destinations facing similar challenges or successfully addressing specific issues. Best practices and lessons learned can be identified and applied to enhance Si Thep's tourism development.

Analysing visitor demographics and market segments attracted to Si Thep District can help understand the preferences and interests of different visitor groups. This can lead to tailored marketing strategies and tourism offerings based on identified market segments. Finally, the destination's preparedness and resilience can be investigated during crises, such as natural disasters or global events affecting tourism. The effectiveness of crisis management plans, community resilience, and the role of stakeholders in mitigating the impact of unforeseen challenges can be assessed. Evaluating the long-term economic impact of spiritual and cultural tourism on Si Thep District is also crucial. This can involve assessing job creation, income distribution, and the overall contribution of tourism to the local economy. Opportunities for diversifying economic benefits beyond the tourism sector can also be explored.

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