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HERITAGE TOURISM AND THE ECONOMIC SUSTAINABILITY OF LOCAL COMMUNITIES: INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE

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Abstract
Heritage tourism is widely promoted as an instrument of local economic development, yet the evidence on who actually benefits is more ambivalent than the policy discourse suggests. This paper reviews international experience on the relationship between heritage tourism and the economic sustainability of resident communities. It distinguishes four channels through which tourism reaches the local economy — income and employment, small local business, property and land, and public revenue — and shows that each may either strengthen or erode household resilience depending on how the flow is governed. Evidence from European, Asian and North African heritage cities indicates that designation reliably raises visitor numbers, but that the retention of the resulting income locally is not automatic. Rising rents, the conversion of residential and mixed-use property to tourist accommodation, the replacement of everyday retail by souvenir trade, and the seasonal and low-wage character of much tourism employment are recurrent findings. The paper argues that community participation in governance is the decisive moderating condition, and that economic sustainability should be assessed through indicators of local retention and functional diversity rather than through visitor numbers alone.

Keywords
heritage tourism; economic sustainability; local community; resilience; gentrification; community participation.

1. Introduction

International tourism reached 1.4 billion arrivals in 2024 and 1.52 billion in 2025, recovering well beyond the pre-pandemic level [1, 2]. A substantial share of this

movement is directed at cultural heritage, and inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage List has a measurable effect on demand. An analysis of the twenty-seven European Union member states found that each additional inscribed site raises visitor numbers by an average of 0.22 per cent [3], and panel evidence from fifty Spanish provinces identifies heritage as an independent factor of regional tourist attractiveness [4]. Sites of particularly high standing draw visitors not only to themselves but to the surrounding territory [5].

These findings are routinely used to justify heritage-led development strategies, on the assumption that additional visitors translate into additional local income. The assumption deserves scrutiny. Visitor growth is a gross flow; what matters for the resident population is how much of that flow is retained locally, who receives it, and whether it is stable enough to be planned around. Studies of historic city centres under tourism pressure record outcomes that run in the opposite direction: rising property values, the displacement of residents, and the conversion of ordinary commercial functions into a tourist monoculture [6, 7].

The purpose of this paper is to review the international evidence on this relationship. It asks through which channels heritage tourism reaches the local economy, under what conditions those channels strengthen rather than erode household resilience, and which governance instruments have been shown to influence the outcome.

2. Materials and Methods

The paper is based on a structured review of peer-reviewed literature on the economic and social effects of heritage tourism on resident communities. Three selection criteria were applied: the study reports empirical evidence rather than a purely normative argument; its unit of analysis is a heritage destination and its resident population; and the outcome examined is economic or livelihood-related, including income, employment, business structure, property and community wellbeing.

Sources were grouped into three categories. Macro-level studies establish whether heritage designation affects visitor flows and regional economic performance. Case-based studies of individual heritage cities document how those flows are distributed within the local economy. Studies of resident attitudes and participation identify the governance

conditions under which benefits are retained. Evidence was compared along four channels of transmission, which are set out in Section 3.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Four channels of transmission

The literature does not treat the local economic effect of heritage tourism as a single quantity. It is more usefully understood as operating through four distinct channels, each with its own beneficiaries and its own risks. Figure 1 sets out this structure.

Figure 1. Channels through which heritage tourism affects the economic resilience of resident communities

The first channel is income and employment. Tourism generates jobs in accommodation, catering, transport and guiding, and a considerable part of this work is informal, which makes it accessible to households with limited capital but leaves them without social protection. The second is small local business, including crafts, food and guiding services, where value added is most likely to remain in the locality. The third is property and land, which operates in the opposite direction: demand for short-term accommodation raises rents and sale prices and alters tenure patterns. The fourth is public revenue from entrance fees, licences and taxes, whose local effect depends entirely on whether it is returned to the site and its surrounding neighbourhoods or transferred elsewhere.

The distinction matters because the four channels do not move together. A destination may record rapid growth in visitor numbers and in public revenue while household resilience declines, if the property channel is displacing the residents who would otherwise supply labour and operate small businesses. Assessing local economic sustainability through visitor numbers alone conceals exactly this divergence.

3.2. Evidence on outcomes

Table 1 summarises evidence from studies conducted in different regional contexts. Two regularities emerge. Designation reliably increases demand, and the macro-level evidence on this point is consistent across the European studies. But the case-level

evidence on distribution is far less encouraging, and the risks cluster in the property channel.

Table 1. Selected evidence on heritage tourism and local economic outcomes

Context	Focus	Principal finding	Ref.
EU-27 member states	Effect of designation on demand	Each additional World Heritage site raises visitor numbers by an average of 0.22%	[3]
50 Spanish provinces	Regional attractiveness	Heritage identified as an independent factor of tourist attractiveness	[4]
European regions	Spatial reach of benefits	Sites of high standing attract flows to the surrounding region, not only to themselves	[5]
European historic centres	Pressure on urban functions	Overtourism erodes residential and everyday commercial functions in central districts	[6]
Yogyakarta, Indonesia	Heritage-led redevelopment	Rising land prices, gentrification and displacement of the resident population	[7]
Hoi An, Vietnam	Living heritage and resilience	Resilience to tourism pressure is tied to the adaptive capacity of the resident community	[8]
Carthage region, Tunisia	Resident support for heritage tourism	Perceived personal benefit shapes willingness to support conservation and tourism	[9]
36 cultural sites, China	Community participation	Participation assessed through four criteria and twenty-three indicators	[10]
Behramkale, Türkiye	Rural heritage community	Seasonality and dependence on a single sector weaken household income stability	[11]

Source: compiled by the authors from the cited studies.

The property channel is where the evidence is most consistent and most negative. Research on heritage-led redevelopment in Yogyakarta documents rising land prices, gentrification and the displacement of established residents as a direct consequence of successful heritage promotion [7]. Comparable pressure on residential and everyday commercial functions has been recorded in European historic centres [6]. The mechanism is straightforward: where residential property can be converted to tourist accommodation at higher return, and where everyday retail can be converted to souvenir trade at higher rent, the conversion proceeds until the resident population that sustained the neighbourhood has largely left. The heritage fabric may be preserved while the community that gave it meaning is not.

The employment channel is more ambiguous. Tourism jobs are accessible, but they are often seasonal, low-paid and concentrated in a single sector, which is precisely the profile that reduces household resilience to shocks. The experience of rural heritage communities illustrates this clearly: dependence on one seasonal sector leaves income unstable across the year and exposed to any interruption of the visitor flow [11]. The pandemic period demonstrated the consequence at scale.

Against this, the evidence on small local business is more positive, but conditional. Value added is retained locally where residents own the assets and operate the enterprises. Where accommodation, retail and tour operation are owned externally, the same visitor flow produces a much smaller local effect. This is why studies of living heritage cities find that resilience depends less on the volume of tourism than on the adaptive capacity of the community itself [8].

3.3. Governance conditions

The literature converges on community participation as the condition that determines which of the two outcomes in Figure 1 dominates. Resident support for heritage tourism has been shown to depend on perceived personal benefit rather than on abstract commitment to conservation [9], which implies that participation must be material as well as procedural. An assessment framework developed for thirty-six Chinese cultural heritage sites operationalises participation through four criteria and twenty-three indicators, providing a means of measuring what is often treated only rhetorically [10].

Table 2 sets out the instruments documented in the literature, grouped by the channel they address. They are not alternatives; the cases in which local economic outcomes improved are those in which instruments from several channels were combined.

Table 2. Instruments for anchoring tourism benefits in the local economy

Channel	Instrument	Intended effect
Income and employment	Skills training, formalisation of informal work, off-season programming	Reduces seasonality and improves job quality
Small local business	Local procurement rules, support for crafts, licensing preference for residents	Increases the share of value added retained locally
Property and land	Regulation of short-term letting, protection of mixed use, functional zoning	Slows conversion and displacement
Public revenue	Earmarking entrance fees for the site and its neighbourhoods	Returns revenue to the community bearing the costs
Governance	Representation of residents and small operators in planning; capacity limits	Aligns visitor flows with what the community can absorb

Source: compiled by the authors from [6–11].

Two of these instruments deserve emphasis. Regulating the conversion of property is the only measure that acts directly on the channel where the evidence of harm is strongest, and it is also the measure most often absent from heritage management plans, which typically address the monument rather than the surrounding fabric. Earmarking public

revenue is administratively simple and addresses the asymmetry whereby the costs of tourism are borne locally while the revenue accrues centrally.

3.4. Measuring local economic sustainability

If visitor numbers are an inadequate measure, the question is what should replace them. The literature does not offer a settled indicator set, but the studies reviewed here point consistently towards four measurable dimensions. The first is local retention: the share of visitor expenditure that accrues to enterprises owned and operated by residents, as opposed to leaking to external suppliers, operators and platforms. The second is functional diversity of the historic centre, measured through the proportion of ground-floor premises serving everyday resident needs rather than visitors, which provides an early signal of monofunctional conversion. The third is residential stability, measured through population change, tenure structure and the ratio of short-term to long-term letting. The fourth is income stability across the year, which captures the seasonality that destination-level revenue figures conceal.

Instruments for assessing the impact of cultural tourism have been developed at European level [18], and frameworks for measuring community participation are available [10], but the two have rarely been combined. The practical obstacle is the level of observation. Almost all routinely collected tourism statistics are gathered at destination level, whereas the outcomes that matter for economic sustainability are household-level and neighbourhood-level. Until data collection follows the analytical question, assessments of whether heritage tourism benefits the resident population will continue to rest on inference rather than measurement.

4. Conclusions

Heritage tourism raises visitor numbers reliably; it does not raise local economic resilience reliably. The two should not be conflated, and the review of international experience supports three conclusions.

First, the effect on the resident community operates through several channels that may move in opposite directions at the same time. Growth in visitors and public revenue can coexist with declining household resilience where the property channel is displacing the population. Measuring success by arrivals conceals this divergence and should be

replaced by indicators of local retention, functional diversity of the historic centre, and the stability of household income across the year.

Second, the property channel carries the clearest evidence of harm, and it is the least addressed in practice. Conservation policy concentrates on the physical fabric, while the displacement of the community that inhabits that fabric proceeds through the property market largely unregulated. A heritage centre preserved as a tourist district and emptied of residents has not been sustained in any meaningful sense.

Third, community participation is the decisive moderating condition, but only where it is material rather than consultative. Residents support heritage tourism when they benefit from it, and benefit depends on ownership of assets, access to procurement and genuine representation in decisions about visitor flows. Frameworks now exist to measure participation with reasonable precision, which removes the excuse that it cannot be assessed.

The evidence base remains geographically uneven and concentrated in Europe and East and Southeast Asia. Extending empirical work on local economic outcomes to under-researched heritage regions, and doing so with household-level rather than destination-level data, is the most productive direction for further research.

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