

Literature Review Study: The Role of Culture and Tradition in Influencing Tourist Experiences in Oman

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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
culture; Oman; sustainable tourism; tourist experience; tradition	The global tourism industry, particularly in the Middle East region, has played a significant role in economic diversification. In the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, massive investment in this sector is expected to not only increase tourist arrivals but also strengthen the destination's global image as a modern tourism hub. On the other hand, Oman still maintains its rich culture and traditions to provide a unique attraction for tourists. This research aims to explore how local cultural elements and traditions influence tourists' experiences in Oman. This research used a study literature review (SLR) approach, as the data were collected through document analysis, observation, and documentation on cultural tourism activities, such as visits to historical tourist attractions, traditional markets, and cultural festivals in Oman. The results show that cultural elements, such as traditional architecture, traditional markets, and cultural festivals, have a significant role in creating authentic and meaningful tourism experiences. Besides enjoying the natural beauty of Oman, tourists are also interested in the interactions they have with local people and the traditions that are still maintained. Cultural preservation carried out by the Omani government and society has proven to be an important factor in strengthening tourist attractions. This research confirms that strengthening cultural identity through tourism promotion strategies can provide a deeper experience for tourists, while supporting sustainable tourism growth.

INTRODUCTION

The tourism industry in the Middle East has grown significantly in recent years, especially in key destinations such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and Egypt, with Saudi Arabia and the UAE leading this growth through massive investment in tourism infrastructure to diversify dependence on oil. In 2023, the Middle East became the only region in the world to surpass pre-pandemic tourism levels, with a 20% increase in tourist arrivals compared to 2019. Saudi Arabia, in particular, recorded a 72% increase in foreign visitor spending during the first three quarters of 2023, reaching \$26.6 billion, while the UAE continued to attract millions of visitors, especially to Dubai, which set a new tourism record in 2023. (Arabian Business, 2023).

In the midst of rapid globalization, as many Middle Eastern countries are competing to develop many tourist destinations with modern facilities and man-made attractions, Oman offers a different approach by highlighting cultural authenticity and identity. By exploring the role of culture and tradition in the tourist experience, this research aims to reveal how these elements shape visitor perceptions, expectations, and satisfaction.

Oman has a rich cultural heritage and traditions, which become major attractions for tourists. Oman's unique culture, influenced by history, religion, and geography, creates a tourism experience that is not only

interesting but also immersive. Local traditions, from handicrafts, art, music to festivals, provide a rich context for visitors who want to understand more about Omani society.

Heritage tourism has become increasingly popular, with more and more tourists seeking meaningful connections with the past (Li Xu, et al., 2022). Understanding the influence of culture and tradition in the tourism context in Oman is not only important for the development of effective marketing strategies, but also to ensure that sustainable tourism development can maintain and preserve the cultural heritage that is the foundation of the tourist experience. This research is expected to provide valuable insights for stakeholders in the tourism sector, as well as to contribute to academic literature regarding culture-based tourism in the Middle East region.

METHOD

This method employed the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method. Systematic Literature Review is a term used to refer to research methodology or specific research and development carried out to collect and evaluate research related to a particular topic focus (Lusiana, 2014). The SLR method was used to identify, evaluate, and synthesize research related to the role of culture and tradition in influencing tourists' experiences in Oman. The data in this research were in the form of online articles. The data collection in this research was conducted through literature search, initial selection, and in-depth review. The data were analyzed using narrative synthesis which included grouping results based on main themes, such as cultural and traditional elements (e.g. traditional food, festivals, architecture), the influence of culture on tourist satisfaction, and the role of culture in creating unique experiences. Noting areas that have not been explored or insufficiently documented in previous research was conducted to identify research gaps.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive Analysis Results

Based on the observations, several important points regarding tourists' interactions with local cultural elements in Oman can be identified, illustrating how culture and traditions influence their experiences. This is discussed in the following points:

1. Natural beauty and cultural heritage preservation

Almost all tourist destinations in Oman are pristine natural and cultural destinations, as quoted from the travel guide article written by Kim and Del Hogg (2023) published on the Going The Whole HOGG website entitled "19 Amazing Places to visit in Oman" (<https://www.goingthewholehogg.com/19-amazing-places-to-visit-in-oman/>). It is said that Oman does have deserts, but it also has much more than that, such as waterfalls, beaches, mountains, and *wadis* form a beautiful landscape. The following are some of the tourist destinations discussed in the article:

- a. Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque: Located in Muscat, this mosque is known for its impressive architecture, including a massive Persian carpet and a grand chandelier.
- b. Wadi Shab: A picturesque oasis featuring turquoise waters and caves, perfect for swimming and hiking.
- c. Wadi Bani Khalid: Another beautiful *wadi* with clear pools, waterfalls, and lush vegetation, ideal for swimming and relaxing.
- d. Salalah: Known for its green landscapes, especially during the *Khareef* (monsoon) season, Salalah offers beautiful beaches and cultural experiences.

- e. Bimmah Sinkhole: A natural wonder where visitors can swim in a deep sinkhole surrounded by scenic parkland.
- f. Muttrah Souq: A traditional market in Muscat, perfect for shopping for local handicrafts, spices, and souvenirs.
- g. Jebel Shams: The highest mountain in Oman, offering stunning views, hiking opportunities, and the famous Grand Canyon of Oman.
- h. Bandar Al Khiran: A scenic coastal area with beautiful beaches and opportunities for snorkeling and diving.
- i. Nizwa Fort: A historic fort that displays Oman's heritage and offers panoramic views of the surrounding area.
- j. Al Hoota Cave: A fascinating cave system that is open for tours, displaying impressive stalactites and stalagmites.
- k. Frankincense Land Museum: Located in Salalah, this museum explores the history and significance of frankincense in Oman.
- l. Ras al Jinz Turtle Reserve: A protected area where visitors can observe sea turtles nesting on the beaches.

2. Traditional architecture

Oman is known for its traditional Arabic architecture, including historic forts and markets, which give it an authentic appeal. This was expressed by Al-Kalbani (2015), who explained how these elements reflect Omani history and culture. Forts like Nizwa, for example, not only serve as defense in their time but also become symbols of local architectural strength and craftsmanship. Meanwhile, traditional markets, such as Muttrah Souq, offer a unique experience with narrow alleys filled with the aroma of spices and artisanal craft items, providing a glimpse into the daily lives of Omanis.

3. Culture festival

With the development of festivals, Oman is increasingly becoming an appealing tourist destination for tourists from all over the world. These festivals also become an important tourism promotion event for Oman, so that more and more people are interested in visiting the country (Kabar Oman, 2023). These festivals are held every year in almost every city in Oman, highlighting the special features of each place. The show includes exhibitions of traditional clothing, regional specialties, traditional dance performances, sales of typical goods such as handicrafts and spices, as well as horse and camel attractions that reflect Omani Bedouin traditions. This not only revives local culture but also creates a unique experience for tourists.

4. Increase in the number of tourists

With projected tourist arrivals reaching more than 5 million by 2024, there are indications that the appeal of Omani culture and traditions is increasingly being accepted by the global market. This implies that tourism development strategies that focus on these elements are very effective (The Arabian Stories, 2024). This achievement reflects Oman's success in highlighting cultural riches such as traditional festivals, historic architecture, pristine natural beauty, and the friendliness of the locals. Additionally, the combination of traditional experiences with modern facilities also becomes a major attraction. This projection also shows the increasing interest of global tourists in destinations that offer authentic and educational experiences, which indirectly makes Oman a successful example of culture-based tourism in the Gulf region.

5. “Discover Beauty of Oman” campaign

The Ministry of Tourism launched the 2018 summer campaign under the theme “Discover Beauty of Oman”, with 51 hotels taking part by offering attractive package during the season in a bid to benefit from unique

tourist potentials of the Sultanate during summer (Oman Observer, 2018). The initiative aims to highlight Oman's unique tourist attractions, especially in summer, when most of the Middle East experiences extreme temperatures. Salalah, often referred to as the “Jewel of Arabia,” is renowned for its extraordinary natural beauty, especially during the *Khareef* season. The city offers lush green views, stunning waterfalls, and a cool climate, which is contrast to the hot weather in most areas of the Middle East. Salalah's specialty lies in its combination of enchanting nature, rich cultural heritage, and its role as a frankincense trading center in the past, making it an attractive destination for tourists looking for a different experience in this region.

Discussion

This research emphasizes the importance of preserving local culture in Oman, especially in Muscat, as a strategy to attract tourists. Efforts to preserve and celebrate cultural heritage through annual festivals provide opportunities for visitors to interact directly with local traditions and crafts. These festivals not only create authentic experiences, but also build an emotional bond between tourists and Omani culture, which becomes a major attraction for visitors.

Besides organizing the festival, the Oman Ministry of Tourism also implemented the "Discover Beauty of Oman" campaign. The campaign is designed to introduce the country's natural beauty and cultural riches to tourists from within and outside the country. By highlighting the unique aspects of Oman's culture and environment, the campaign serves to raise awareness of the country's tourism potential.

Through this strategy, Oman seeks not only to increase the number of tourist visits, but also to strengthen the country's image as a tourist destination rich in culture and tradition. The combination of cultural preservation and integrated tourism promotion creates a synergy that can support sustainable tourism development and provide benefits to local communities.

The main challenges of this research include the difficulty in collecting accurate and representative data from tourists visiting Oman. This is due to variations in tourists' backgrounds, cultural experiences, as well as the availability of access to relevant information. In addition, the preservation of local culture is often hampered by modernization and development of tourism infrastructure, which can reduce the authenticity of traditions and make tourists lose interest.

However, this research also opens up significant opportunities for developing culture-based tourism strategies. With increasing global interest in authentic tourism experiences, Oman can make use of its cultural heritage to attract more visitors. Another opportunity lies in collaboration between the government and local communities in preserving traditions, which can improve community welfare while strengthening Oman's image as a cultural tourism destination.

Furthermore, this research can be a basis for formulating more effective and sustainable tourism policies. By understanding the relationship between culture, tradition, and tourist satisfaction, authorities can design programs that support cultural preservation while still meeting visitors' needs and expectations. This creates synergies that can benefit all parties, including tourists, local communities and the tourism sector as a whole.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis, conclusions can be drawn. In terms of natural beauty and cultural heritage preservation, Oman has managed to maintain the authenticity of its natural beauty, traditional architecture, festivals, and customs, giving visitors an insight into the history and way of life of the local people. This creates a deeper connection between tourists and the community, strengthening their experience during their visit. As a luxury destination rooted in tradition, Oman is seen as attractive by travelers seeking an immersive

cultural experience. The combination of luxury and tradition makes Oman competitive with other Gulf countries. Meanwhile, the city of Muscat is known for its traditional Arabic architecture, such as historic forts and markets, as well as cultural festivals such as the Muscat Festival, which allow tourists to engage directly with Omani art, music and cuisine, further enriching their experience. In terms of the number of visitors, tourist arrivals of more than 5 million by 2024 show that the appeal of Omani culture and traditions is increasingly being accepted in the global market, demonstrating the effectiveness of tourism development strategies that focus on these elements. Furthermore, the growing festivals in Oman make this country an attractive tourist destination for global tourists, serving as an important tourism promotion event. In addition, Oman's rich culture, intertwined with traditions of sailing and trade, is visible in its blend of modern life and traditional crafts, which is also reflected in architecture, such as Muscat's Royal Opera House and the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque. Lastly, in terms of tourism campaign, the Ministry of Tourism launched the "Discover Beauty of Oman" campaign involving 51 hotels to offer attractive packages, supporting unique tourism potential during the summer season.

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