

Lived Experiences of Visitors in Laguna Province: A Phenomenological Study of Tourist Experiences and Cultural Appreciation

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tourism experiences, cultural appreciation, phenomenology, visitor satisfaction, Laguna Province, experiential tourism, cultural tourism

Abstract. This study explored the lived experiences of visitors in Laguna Province, Philippines, focusing on their tourism experiences and cultural appreciation. Specifically, it examined how tourists described their most memorable experiences, the meanings they attached to these encounters, and the themes that emerged from their narratives. Using a qualitative phenomenological research design, the study conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with five randomly selected tourists visiting different destinations in Laguna. Data were analyzed using Colaizzi's seven-step phenomenological method to identify significant statements, formulate meanings, and develop thematic clusters. The findings revealed five major themes: (1) Laguna provides satisfying and memorable tourism experiences; (2) meaningful travel is shaped by diverse attractions and authentic local encounters; (3) tourism promotes learning, cultural appreciation, and community connection; (4) operational and infrastructural improvements are needed to enhance visitor satisfaction; and (5) continuous improvements in facilities and services can encourage repeat visits and destination loyalty. Participants highlighted the province's scenic landscapes, historical sites, cultural heritage, local cuisine, and warm hospitality as key contributors to their positive experiences. They also emphasized that interactions with local communities strengthened their appreciation of Laguna's traditions and identity. However, concerns regarding transportation, overcrowding, signage, and affordability were identified as challenges affecting the overall visitor experience. The study concludes that tourism in Laguna extends beyond recreation by fostering cultural understanding, personal enrichment, and destination attachment. The findings suggest that tourism stakeholders should strengthen authentic cultural experiences while addressing infrastructure and service-related concerns to improve visitor satisfaction and support sustainable tourism development. These insights provide practical guidance for tourism planners, local government units, and destination managers in enhancing Laguna's competitiveness as a tourism destination.

Introduction

Tourism has developed into one of the most influential global industries, contributing significantly to economic growth, cultural exchange, and regional development. In contemporary tourism discourse, the focus has shifted from simply visiting destinations to understanding the quality and meaning of visitor experiences. Modern tourists increasingly seek emotional engagement, authenticity, and cultural immersion rather than passive sightseeing (Pine & Gilmore, 2019; Li & Petrick, 2017). The concept of experiential tourism emphasizes that travel is not only about consumption of services but also about the creation of memorable and meaningful experiences. These experiences are shaped by cognitive, emotional, sensory, and social dimensions that influence how tourists evaluate destinations (Kim, Ritchie, & McCormick, 2019). As tourism becomes more experience-oriented, understanding how visitors interpret and internalize their journeys has become an important area of academic inquiry.

Tourist experiences are highly subjective and are best understood through qualitative and phenomenological approaches. Phenomenology allows researchers to explore lived experiences from the perspective of the participants themselves, capturing meanings that cannot be quantified through surveys alone (van Manen, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach is particularly useful in tourism studies, where personal interpretation, memory, and emotion play central roles in shaping satisfaction and destination meaning (Tung & Ritchie, 2017). Cultural tourism has also become a major dimension of travel behavior, as visitors increasingly seek to engage with local traditions, heritage, and community practices. Cultural experiences allow tourists to develop deeper understanding and appreciation of host communities, enhancing intercultural awareness and personal transformation (Richards, 2018; Du Cros & McKercher, 2019). These cultural interactions often become central to how tourists evaluate the value of their travel experiences.

In many destinations, including developing tourism regions, cultural authenticity and human interaction significantly influence visitor satisfaction. Positive engagement with local residents, guides, and service providers enhances emotional connection and contributes to more memorable tourism experiences (Chen & Rahman, 2018; Li & Petrick, 2017). Conversely, lack of meaningful interaction may result in superficial experiences that fail to create long-term impact on tourists. In the Philippine context, tourism plays a vital role in supporting local economies and preserving cultural heritage. The country's diverse natural landscapes and rich traditions make it a competitive destination in Southeast Asia. Tourist behavior in the Philippines is strongly influenced by destination image, cultural value, and experiential satisfaction (Aquino et al., 2018; Aguilar, 2023). As tourism continues to grow, there is increasing interest in understanding how visitors perceive and experience specific destinations.

Laguna Province is one of the most visited tourism destinations in the Philippines due to its accessibility from Metro Manila and its diverse attractions. It is known for its hot spring resorts, natural landscapes, historical landmarks, and cultural heritage sites. These features make Laguna a hybrid destination that combines leisure, nature, and cultural tourism experiences (Maraña et al., 2024). Despite its popularity, limited research has explored how tourists personally interpret their experiences in the province. Most existing studies on Laguna tourism focus on economic impact, visitor satisfaction, or destination marketing strategies. While these studies provide useful quantitative insights, they often overlook the deeper emotional and cultural meanings attached to visitor experiences. There is a need to explore how tourists construct meaning from their interactions, surroundings, and cultural encounters in Laguna Province (Gallarza & Saura, 2016; Stone & Nyaupane, 2016).

Understanding lived experiences is important because tourism is not only about physical movement but also about memory formation and emotional transformation. Memorable tourism experiences are shaped by engagement, novelty, meaningfulness, and personal reflection, which influence future travel behavior and destination loyalty (Kim et al., 2019; Tung & Ritchie, 2017). These dimensions are best captured through phenomenological inquiry. In Laguna, tourism experiences are also shaped by cultural elements such as local cuisine, religious traditions, festivals, and community-based tourism activities. These cultural expressions provide opportunities for visitors to engage with local identity and traditions, fostering appreciation and understanding (Richards, 2018; Du Cros & McKercher, 2019). However, the extent to which tourists internalize these experiences remains underexplored.

Given the increasing importance of experience-based tourism, it is essential to examine how visitors perceive and interpret their journeys in Laguna Province. A phenomenological approach provides a suitable framework for capturing these subjective realities, allowing for a deeper understanding of emotional, cultural, and social dimensions of tourism experiences (van Manen, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Finally, this study seeks to contribute to tourism literature by exploring the lived experiences of visitors in Laguna Province. The findings may provide valuable insights for tourism planners, local government units, and stakeholders in enhancing cultural tourism development and improving visitor engagement strategies.

This study aims to explore the lived experiences of tourist visitors in Laguna Province by examining how they personally describe and interpret their most significant tourism encounters. Specifically, it seeks to understand the meanings that emerge from participants' narratives and how these meanings reflect their overall tourism experiences. Using a phenomenological approach, the study aims to capture the essence of visitors' experiences, identify the meanings formulated from their testimonies, and analyze the common themes that emerge from these shared experiences. Through this process, the study provides a deeper understanding of tourists' perceptions, cultural appreciation, and memorable experiences within the province of Laguna.

Research Questions

This study explores the lived experiences of tourist visitors in Laguna Province, focusing on how they personally describe and interpret their most significant tourism encounters. It seeks to understand the meanings that emerge from participants' narratives and how these meanings reflect their overall experiences. Through a phenomenological approach, the study further identifies and analyzes common themes derived from the formulated meanings of co-participants' testimonies.

1. How do tourist visitors in Laguna describe their most significant experiences?
2. What meanings may be formulated based on the co-participants' testimonies?
3. What themes emerged from the formulated meanings?

Assumptions of the Study

The study is anchored on several assumptions that guided the exploration of the lived experiences of visitors in Laguna Province. These assumptions provide the foundation for understanding how participants perceive, interpret, and describe their tourism experiences and cultural appreciation.

1. Tourist visitors are capable of describing and reflecting on their experiences in Laguna Province, including the attractions, activities, and interactions that made their visit meaningful and memorable.
2. Tourism experiences contribute to visitors' cultural appreciation and understanding of Laguna Province's local traditions, heritage, environment, and community.
3. Common themes and meanings can be derived from the participants' narratives, despite differences in their backgrounds, preferences, and travel experiences, allowing for a deeper understanding of the essence of tourism experiences in Laguna Province.

Methodology

This study utilized a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of tourist visitors in Laguna Province in relation to their tourism experiences and cultural appreciation. Phenomenology was chosen as the most appropriate approach because it focuses on understanding how individuals perceive, interpret, and give meaning to their lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study involved five (5) participants who were randomly selected and interviewed on-site while visiting various tourist destinations in Laguna Province to ensure that responses reflected immediate and authentic tourism experiences.

Data were gathered through semi-structured, in-depth interviews guided by open-ended questions focusing on participants' overall experiences, memorable attractions, cultural appreciation, encountered challenges, and recommendations for improvement. The interview guide allowed participants to freely express their thoughts while ensuring that all relevant aspects of the phenomenon were explored. Prior to data collection, the interview guide underwent content validation by three experts in tourism and qualitative research to assess the relevance, clarity, and appropriateness of the questions. Their comments and recommendations were incorporated to improve the instrument and ensure its alignment with the objectives of the study. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and treated as the primary data for analysis.

For data analysis, the study employed Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step phenomenological analysis method, which provides a rigorous and systematic process for extracting meaning from participants' narratives. This process involved: (1) reading all participants' transcripts to acquire a general sense of their experiences, (2) extracting significant statements related to the phenomenon, (3) formulating meanings from these significant statements, (4) organizing formulated meanings into clusters of themes, (5) developing an exhaustive description of the phenomenon, (6) producing a fundamental structure of the experience, and (7) returning to participants for validation of findings to ensure credibility and accuracy. This method ensured that the essence of the lived experiences of tourists in Laguna was faithfully captured and interpreted.

In addition, the study followed Creswell and Poth's (2018) guidelines for qualitative inquiry, which emphasize bracketing researcher assumptions, maintaining reflexivity, and ensuring that participant voices remain central in the interpretation of data. Trustworthiness was established through strategies such as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout the study. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured by assigning pseudonyms to participants and securely storing all research data. No harm was inflicted on participants, and they were given the right to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty. Furthermore, artificial intelligence (AI) tools, specifically Grammarly, were utilized solely for grammar checking and language refinement. These tools were used

responsibly to enhance clarity and coherence without altering the original meaning, interpretation, or authenticity of the participants' responses and the researcher's analysis.

This methodological approach allowed for a rich and in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of tourists in Laguna Province, capturing not only their descriptions of events but also the meanings and themes underlying their cultural and tourism encounters.

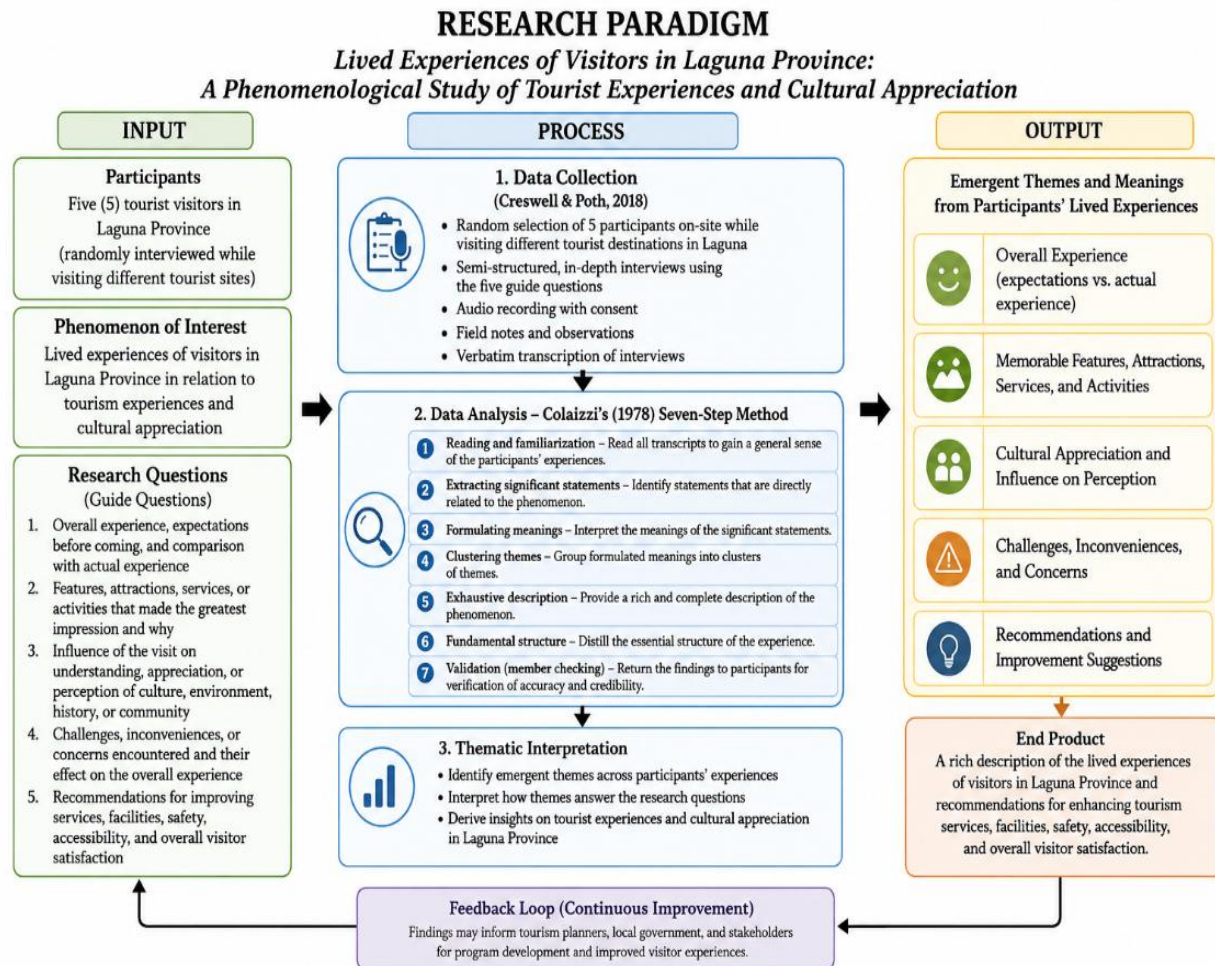


Figure No. 1. Research Paradigm of the Study

The research paradigm of this study follows an Input–Process–Output (IPO) model grounded in phenomenological inquiry, specifically guided by Creswell and Poth (2018) and Colaizzi's (1978) method of analysis. The input consists of five randomly selected tourist visitors in Laguna Province who provide rich descriptions of their lived tourism experiences, including their expectations versus actual experiences, memorable attractions, cultural appreciation, encountered challenges, and recommendations for improvement. The process involves qualitative data collection through on-site semi-structured interviews, audio recording, and verbatim transcription, followed by systematic phenomenological analysis where significant statements are extracted, meanings are formulated, and themes are clustered using Colaizzi's seven-step method, ensuring a rigorous interpretation of lived experiences. The output of the study is the emergence of core themes that describe tourists' meaningful experiences, cultural understanding, satisfaction factors, and improvement insights, which collectively provide a comprehensive understanding of tourism experiences in Laguna Province and serve as a basis for enhancing tourism services, cultural appreciation, and destination development, with a feedback loop reinforcing continuous improvement in local tourism planning and management.

Results and Discussion

A thematic analysis was conducted to identify the common meanings and patterns embedded in the participants' narratives regarding their tourism experiences in Laguna Province. Through Colaizzi's phenomenological method, significant statements were analyzed and organized into theme clusters that reflect the essence of visitors' experiences.

Interview Question	Familiarization	Significant Statements	Formulated Meanings	Theme Clusters	Exhaustive Description	Fundamental Structure
Q1. Describe your overall experience during your visit.	Responses were reviewed repeatedly to understand visitors' overall experiences.	<i>"Exceeded my expectations"; "welcoming atmosphere"; "beautiful landscapes"; "quality services."</i>	Visitors were generally satisfied with their experiences due to positive encounters and quality services.	Visitor Satisfaction; Positive Destination Experience; Quality Services; Educational and Recreational Value	Visitors reported enjoyable and memorable experiences characterized by hospitality, attractive scenery, and well-maintained facilities.	The destination successfully provides satisfying and memorable tourism experiences.
Q2. What attractions, services, or activities were most memorable to you?	Responses were examined to identify memorable aspects of the destination.	<i>"Scenic viewpoints"; "local food"; "warm hospitality"; "historical landmarks"; "guided tours."</i>	Visitors value attractions that provide cultural, educational, and recreational experiences.	Natural Attractions; Cultural Experiences; Historical Significance; Hospitality; Educational Tourism	Memorable experiences stemmed from the combination of natural beauty, culture, history, and tourism services.	Meaningful tourism experiences are created through diverse attractions and authentic local experiences.
Q3. How did the visit influence your understanding of the culture, environment, history, or community?	Narratives were reviewed to determine the impact of the visit on visitors' understanding.	<i>"Appreciation for local culture"; "preserves traditions"; "historical significance"; "environmental conservation."</i>	Tourism enhances awareness and appreciation of local heritage, history, and environmental sustainability.	Cultural Appreciation; Historical Awareness; Environmental Awareness; Community Engagement	The destination promoted deeper understanding of local traditions, heritage preservation, and environmental responsibility.	Tourism serves as a medium for learning, cultural appreciation, and community connection.
Q4. What challenges, inconveniences, or concerns did you encounter?	Responses were analyzed to identify barriers and concerns during the visit.	<i>"Crowded during peak hours"; "limited transportation"; "lack of directional signs"; "expensive food and souvenirs."</i>	Accessibility, navigation, and affordability issues affected some visitors.	Crowding Issues; Transportation Concerns; Navigation Problems; Cost Concerns	Despite minor inconveniences, visitors generally maintained positive perceptions of the destination.	Operational improvements can enhance the overall tourist experience.
Q5. What recommendations can you provide to improve the destination?	Responses were examined to identify suggestions for enhancement.	<i>"More seating areas"; "improve transportation"; "more signs"; "covered areas"; "affordable food choices."</i>	Visitors seek greater convenience, accessibility, comfort, and affordability.	Facility Enhancement; Improved Accessibility; Better Visitor Information; Affordable Tourism Services	Recommendations focused on improving infrastructure, transportation, comfort, and visitor support services.	Continuous improvements in facilities and services can increase visitor satisfaction and encourage repeat visits.

Table No. 1. Thematic Analysis of the Study

Table 1 presents the thematic analysis of participants' responses regarding their tourism experiences at the destination. The analysis generated five key themes that collectively describe visitors' perceptions, experiences, challenges, and recommendations. These themes provide a comprehensive understanding of how tourists evaluate the destination in terms of satisfaction, attractions, learning opportunities, infrastructure, and service improvement. The findings reveal that the

destination offers generally positive, satisfying, and memorable tourism experiences, while also highlighting areas that require operational and infrastructural enhancement. The themes further illustrate that visitor satisfaction is shaped not only by the quality of attractions and activities but also by the availability of supporting facilities and the authenticity of local experiences. Moreover, the results emphasize tourism's broader role in fostering cultural appreciation, learning, and community engagement, consistent with the perspectives of Lin and Kuo (2016), Gallarza and Saura (2016), and Pine and Gilmore (2019), as well as relevant local studies such as Aguilar (2023). The themes in Table 1 underscore the multifaceted nature of tourism experiences and provide insights that can guide destination managers in strengthening competitiveness, improving visitor satisfaction, and promoting sustainable tourism development.

Theme 1: The Destination Successfully Provides Satisfying and Memorable Tourism Experiences

The findings revealed that participants generally described their overall experiences as positive, satisfying, and memorable. Visitors highlighted the welcoming atmosphere, attractive landscapes, quality services, and enjoyable activities that exceeded their expectations. These experiences contributed to their overall satisfaction and positive perception of the destination. This finding suggests that tourist satisfaction is strongly influenced by the quality of experiences offered throughout the visit. According to Lin and Kuo (2016), positive tourism experiences significantly affect visitor satisfaction and future behavioral intentions. Similarly, Gallarza and Saura (2016) emphasized that destination satisfaction serves as a key determinant of visitor loyalty and positive word-of-mouth promotion. The findings also support the concept of the Experience Economy proposed by Pine and Gilmore (2019), which argues that memorable experiences create greater value than merely providing products or services. The results further align with Aguilar's (2023) study on tourism product preferences in Laguna, which found that tourists highly value destinations that offer enjoyable, comfortable, and meaningful experiences. Therefore, the positive experiences described by participants indicate that the destination possesses attributes that contribute to visitor satisfaction and destination competitiveness.

Theme 2: Meaningful Tourism Experiences Are Shaped by Diverse Attractions and Authentic Local Experiences

Participants identified scenic attractions, local cuisine, historical landmarks, cultural activities, and guided tours as the most memorable components of their visit. These attractions allowed visitors to engage with the destination beyond mere sightseeing, creating meaningful and immersive experiences. This finding demonstrates that tourists increasingly seek authentic and diverse experiences that combine recreation, culture, and learning. Kim, Ritchie, and McCormick (2019) argued that memorable tourism experiences are formed when visitors actively engage with unique and meaningful aspects of a destination. Similarly, Tung and Ritchie (2017) noted that authenticity, novelty, and personal involvement significantly contribute to memorable tourism experiences. The results also support the work of Chen and Rahman (2018), who found that cultural experiences positively influence tourist satisfaction and overall destination evaluation. Furthermore, Marañón et al. (2024) highlighted the importance of food tourism in Laguna, emphasizing that local culinary experiences contribute significantly to visitor satisfaction. These findings indicate that a combination of natural attractions, cultural resources, historical sites, and local hospitality enhances the overall tourism experience.

Theme 3: Tourism Serves as a Medium for Learning, Cultural Appreciation, and Community Connection

Participants reported that their visits enhanced their understanding of local culture, traditions, environmental conservation, and historical significance. Through interactions with the local community and exposure to cultural and historical attractions, visitors developed a deeper appreciation of the destination. This finding highlights the educational role of tourism in promoting cultural understanding and social awareness. Du Cros and McKercher (2019) explained that cultural tourism enables visitors to gain meaningful insights into local traditions, heritage, and identity. Likewise, Richards (2018) argued that modern tourists increasingly seek educational and transformative experiences that allow them to connect with local communities and cultures. The findings are also consistent with Aquino et al. (2018), who found that tourism experiences in the Philippines promote appreciation for natural heritage, local culture, and community values. Moreover, Stone and Nyaupane (2016) emphasized that cultural tourism fosters deeper emotional and intellectual engagement with destinations. Therefore, the participants' experiences demonstrate tourism's potential to contribute not only to recreation but also to personal learning and cultural appreciation.

Theme 4: Operational and Infrastructural Improvements Are Necessary to Enhance Visitor Satisfaction

Although participants generally expressed positive experiences, several challenges were identified, including transportation limitations, overcrowding, inadequate directional signage, weather-related concerns, and high costs of food and souvenirs. These issues affected the convenience and accessibility of the tourism experience. This finding suggests that visitor satisfaction is influenced not only by attractions but also by supporting infrastructure and destination management practices. Ritchie and Hudson (2017) emphasized that effective tourism experience management requires the integration of physical facilities, accessibility, and service quality. Similarly, UNWTO (2023) stressed that sustainable tourism

development depends on adequate infrastructure, accessibility, and visitor support services. The findings also support Aguilar's (2023) study on spring resort tourism in Laguna, which identified accessibility, facility maintenance, and visitor management as important determinants of tourist satisfaction. While the identified concerns did not significantly diminish the participants' overall positive perceptions, addressing these issues could further improve the quality of the tourism experience and increase destination competitiveness.

Theme 5: Continuous Improvements in Facilities and Services Can Increase Visitor Satisfaction and Encourage Repeat Visits

Participants recommended enhancing transportation services, installing additional directional signs, increasing seating and waiting areas, providing weather-protected facilities, and offering more affordable tourism-related products and services. These recommendations reflect visitors' expectations for greater convenience, accessibility, and comfort. The findings indicate that continuous improvement is essential for maintaining tourist satisfaction and ensuring sustainable tourism growth. According to Chen and Rahman (2018), tourists are more likely to revisit destinations that continuously improve service quality and visitor experiences. Likewise, Gallarza and Saura (2016) noted that satisfaction derived from high-quality services often translates into loyalty and revisit intentions. Furthermore, UNWTO (2023) emphasizes that enhancing visitor facilities and tourism infrastructure contributes to long-term destination sustainability and competitiveness. By addressing the recommendations identified by participants, destination managers can strengthen visitor experiences, improve satisfaction levels, and foster positive destination image and repeat visitation.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The thematic analysis of the study reveals that the destination is generally perceived by visitors as satisfying, memorable, and enriching, with tourism experiences strongly shaped by the quality of attractions, services, and interactions encountered during the visit. Across the five themes, the findings consistently show that tourists derive high levels of satisfaction from welcoming environments, scenic and cultural attractions, meaningful engagement with local communities, and opportunities for learning and cultural appreciation. These positive experiences are further reinforced by the presence of diverse tourism offerings that combine natural beauty, heritage sites, local cuisine, and guided activities, all of which contribute to the creation of memorable tourism experiences. In line with the Experience Economy framework and supporting literature, the results confirm that tourism value is not only derived from physical products or destinations themselves but more significantly from the quality and depth of experiences provided to visitors. However, despite the generally favorable perceptions, the study also identified persistent challenges related to infrastructure, accessibility, overcrowding, transportation, and cost, indicating that while the destination is already performing well in terms of attractiveness and visitor engagement, there remain critical areas for operational improvement. These findings collectively suggest that destination competitiveness is shaped by both experiential quality and functional efficiency, and both must be addressed to sustain tourist satisfaction and loyalty.

In terms of implications, the study highlights several important considerations for destination managers, local government units, and tourism stakeholders. First, the strong positive experiences reported by visitors imply that existing tourism assets and services should be preserved and further enhanced, particularly those that contribute to emotional engagement, cultural immersion, and memorable experiences. Second, the importance of diverse and authentic attractions suggests that tourism development efforts should prioritize the conservation of cultural heritage, support for local cuisine and businesses, and the continuous creation of meaningful visitor activities that promote interaction with the community. Third, the educational and transformative role of tourism indicates that destinations should intentionally integrate interpretive programs, cultural storytelling, and community-based tourism initiatives to deepen visitor understanding and appreciation. Fourth, the identified infrastructural and operational challenges emphasize the need for improved transportation systems, better crowd and visitor management, clearer signage, and more accessible and affordable facilities to ensure convenience and comfort. Lastly, the recommendations for continuous improvement highlight the necessity of adopting a sustainable tourism management approach that prioritizes ongoing service enhancement, stakeholder collaboration, and infrastructure development. By addressing these implications, the destination can strengthen its competitiveness, enhance visitor satisfaction, encourage repeat visitation, and ensure long-term sustainable tourism development.

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Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article. Due to the qualitative nature of the research and to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants, the full interview transcripts are not publicly available but may be obtained from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Appendices

No appendices are attached to this study.