

# Tourism Research: A 20-20 Vision



**Edited by**

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## The tourism destiny of World Heritage cultural sites

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Design and setting by P.K. McBride

# 15 The tourism destiny of World Heritage cultural sites

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## Setting the scene

In the wide spectrum of interesting and emerging research tracks in tourism studies, our focus is on the structural role of cultural resources in shaping tourism landscapes and attractions. Understanding the dynamics of the cultural tourism market starts with the identification of cultural resources and their territorial embedding (Jansen-Verbeke, 2009). The objective of this chapter is to open a discussion on the particular role of world heritage sites as cultural resources for the development of a global and dynamic tourism market and as economic resources for local and regional development. Our main hypothesis is that tourism is one way of capitalizing on cultural resources in situ, looking at tourism as a proactive agent in the process of conservation and of building cultural identities for territories and their communities, rather than tourism as a destroyer of the past and of the uniqueness and beauty of places.

The most crucial agency in this global process of cultural awareness and identity building, in designing conservation policies and eventually launching cultural tourism has been UNESCO (United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization) This global organization ratified *The Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage*, more commonly known as the World Heritage Convention, in 1972 to establish a system to identify and conserve cultural and natural heritage of outstanding universal value (UNESCO, 2009a). The World Heritage list now includes some 878 properties considered as having ‘outstanding universal value’, including 679 cultural, 174 natural and 25 mixed cultural and natural sites (UNESCO, 2009b). World Heritage Sites (WHS) can range from single monuments, such as the Taj Mahal or the Statue of Liberty, through to entire cities and sites or cultural landscapes that extend across international boundaries.

WHS bear a unique and important testimony of the past to the future generations. Prospective sites must meet at least one of ten criteria, of which six apply specifically to cultural sites (UNESCO, 2009c). Tourism does not feature in this list, yet it is widely recognized that the ‘International Top Brand’ benefits, affiliated with

designation, potentially open significant tourism opportunities for communities in or adjacent to designated sites (Buckley *et al.*, 2004). It is for this reason that gaining designation is a coveted prize that can act as a focal point for national marketing campaigns (Li *et al.*, 2008). This duality of designation criteria that exclude tourism and the reality of tourism as an underlying rationale for seeking designation has generated a lively discourse on whether and how the two can be managed in a holistic and mutually beneficial manner. Ideally, tourism should be a complementary activity. The experience of rediscovering the past is a clear 'leitmotiv' for places to tell their story with tourism providing the vehicle to do so. But, tourism and tourists' demands on sites, real and perceived, have become a source of antagonism (Shackley, 1998; Harrison and Hitchcock, 2005). The issue has gained more prominence with the emergence of cultural tourism as a much sought-after commodity.

Cultural differences between places and communities have been a source of inspiration for writers, painters and artists, and a key motive for travellers since ancient times. Some people have long travelled to experience different cultures and many destinations have promoted their heritage as tourist attractions for centuries (Prentice, 1993). It was only in the late 1970s and early 1980s, though, that 'cultural tourism' emerged as a discrete product category (Tighe, 1986). Indeed, cultural tourism remains an evolving idea (Timothy and Boyd, 2003; see also Chapter 13). Some academics tend to look at cultural activities as an exponent of life style and interests in the context of the usual environment rather than a category of travel motivations, therefore regarding this a subject of interdisciplinary social analysis. Others define cultural tourism differently, reflecting ongoing trends and changes in values, placing more emphasis on the use of cultural resources for tourism (Jansen-Verbeke *et al.*, 2008), on the cultural context, motives and activities of tourists (Richards and Wilson 2006) or on the dynamics of a 'new' market niche (McKercher and du Cros, 2002).

The academic investigation into the relationship between tourism and WHS is largely fragmented, involving individual case studies that make broad generalizations about site-specific issues (Shackley, 1998). The perception that tourism's impact is negative marks much recent research work. Yet tourism has a multidimensional impact, and if managed in an intelligent way can be beneficial to many sites. The challenge is to develop a deeper understanding of the underlying forces that affect tourism sustainability and to understand how these interact in a site-specific context. This chapter presents some critical reflections on past research of tourism and cultural resources, World Heritage sites in particular, and seeks to identify key issues for a future research agenda.

**Chapter extract**

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