

Heritage Tourism in Davao City: Challenges in Preservation and Promotion of Historical Sites

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the heritage tourism landscape of Davao City, Philippines, focusing on the preservation and promotion of its historical sites. Through a mixed-methods approach, including qualitative interviews with key stakeholders and quantitative surveys with tourists and local residents, the study identifies systemic challenges that affect sustainable heritage tourism. Key issues include inadequate funding, urban development pressures, insufficient policy implementation, and low public awareness. The paper emphasizes the importance of community engagement, public-private partnerships, and integrated marketing strategies in overcoming these obstacles. Recommendations are provided to enhance the long-term viability and appeal of Davao's cultural assets.

Keywords: Heritage tourism, Davao City, cultural heritage, preservation, tourism promotion, Philippines

INTRODUCTION

Davao City, one of the Philippines' largest metropolitan areas in Mindanao, boasts a diverse historical and cultural heritage. With its mix of indigenous traditions, colonial influences, and multicultural communities, Davao City is home to various ancestral houses, museums, monuments, and religious structures that symbolize the city's rich past. Heritage tourism, defined as tourism centered around cultural and historical attractions, has the potential to contribute significantly to the local economy, identity, and education (Timothy & Boyd, 2003).

Despite this potential, the preservation and promotion of historical sites in Davao City face numerous challenges. The tension between modernization and heritage conservation is palpable in urban centers, and Davao is no exception. The rapid urbanization and infrastructure expansion risk damaging or overshadowing valuable cultural assets (Zerrudo, 2010).

This paper aims to examine the current state of heritage tourism in Davao City, identify the challenges in preserving historical sites, and analyze existing promotion strategies. It provides insights that may guide future policies and initiatives supporting sustainable heritage tourism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Heritage tourism has increasingly gained attention as a sustainable approach to cultural and economic development (Timothy & Boyd, 2003). Scholars argue that it fosters cultural appreciation and identity formation while providing economic benefits through job creation and local spending (Ashworth & Tunbridge, 2000). In the context of Southeast Asia, heritage tourism also plays a crucial role in nation-building and reconciliation of historical narratives (Hitchcock, King & Parnwell, 2009).

In the Philippines, heritage preservation is guided by laws such as Republic Act 10066 or the National Cultural Heritage Act, which aims to protect tangible and intangible heritage (Zerrudo, 2010). However, implementation remains uneven due to weak local governance structures, limited funding, and competing priorities. Studies by Dela Santa (2021) and Cabuloy et al. (2017) have noted the gaps between national heritage frameworks and grassroots cultural tourism practices.

Marketing heritage tourism also poses challenges, particularly in balancing authenticity with tourist expectations. Scholars emphasize the need for destination branding, digital engagement, and interpretive planning to make heritage sites more accessible and attractive (Chhabra, 2009; Poria, Reichel, & Biran, 2006).

METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a mixed-methods research design to triangulate data and ensure a comprehensive understanding of the heritage tourism dynamics in Davao City. Mixed-methods research is especially valuable in tourism studies for capturing the richness of cultural contexts and stakeholder perspectives (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

Qualitative Data Collection Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten stakeholders, including local government officials from the City Tourism Operations Office (CTOO), heritage site custodians, historians, and representatives from cultural NGOs. The interview guide was developed based on prior studies on cultural heritage and tourism governance (Timothy, 2011; Dela Santa, 2021). Questions centered on the existing challenges in heritage preservation, funding constraints, the implementation of the National Cultural Heritage Act (RA 10066), and the efficacy of current tourism promotion strategies. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was audio-recorded with the consent of participants.

Quantitative Data Collection A structured survey was administered to 150 respondents, composed of both tourists visiting Davao City and local residents. A stratified random sampling technique was used to ensure demographic diversity across age groups, gender, and place of residence. The survey items included questions on awareness of heritage sites, visitation frequency, perceptions of site condition, and satisfaction with tourism information and infrastructure. The questionnaire was adapted from validated instruments used in previous heritage tourism studies (Poria, Reichel, & Biran, 2006; Chhabra, 2009). Survey administration was conducted over a two-week period in key public locations including parks, transit terminals, and museums.

Site Observation Direct observation was employed to assess the physical condition, accessibility, and interpretive quality of four selected heritage sites: Museo Dabawenyo, Osmeña Park, San Pedro Cathedral, and the Japanese Tunnel. Observational data were collected using a checklist format that included criteria such as signage quality, availability of guided tours, cleanliness, and visible conservation efforts. Site documentation was supported by photographs and researcher field notes.

Data Analysis Qualitative data from interviews were transcribed and coded using thematic analysis, a technique suitable for identifying recurrent patterns and stakeholder perceptions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). NVivo software was employed to organize and classify responses according to key themes such as preservation challenges, policy gaps, and promotional efforts.

Survey data were analyzed using SPSS to generate descriptive statistics, including frequency distributions, mean scores, and cross-tabulations. Where appropriate, correlation analysis was conducted to determine associations between demographic variables and awareness or satisfaction levels. The combination of qualitative insights and quantitative measures provided a nuanced understanding of the heritage tourism landscape in Davao City.

This methodological framework ensures rigor, relevance, and contextual sensitivity, drawing on best practices in cultural tourism research (Creswell, 2014; Timothy & Boyd, 2003).

RESULTS

Inventory of Heritage Sites in Davao City

Several heritage landmarks were identified during field visits and stakeholder interviews. Among these, four notable sites were prioritized for analysis due to their prominence and public accessibility:

- **Museo Dabawenyo:** A city-run museum showcasing artifacts from indigenous tribes, Spanish colonization, and World War II.
- **San Pedro Cathedral:** The oldest church in Davao City, featuring neo-gothic architecture and serving as a cultural and religious landmark.
- **Japanese Tunnel:** A remnant of Japanese occupation during WWII, partially preserved as a tourist site.
- **Osmeña Park:** A historic urban space that holds symbolic and political significance in Davao's development.

Challenges in Preservation

Funding and Resource Limitations: Respondents from the CTOO and local heritage NGOs unanimously emphasized the chronic lack of funding for maintenance and restoration. Many heritage sites rely on local government allocations which are often insufficient and inconsistent. As noted by Chhabra (2009), financial sustainability remains a critical challenge in heritage tourism worldwide.

Urban Development Pressures: Survey respondents (82%) and interviewees identified urbanization as a major threat to heritage sites. For example, encroachments near Osmeña Park and traffic congestion around San Pedro Cathedral were seen as diminishing the aesthetic and experiential value of these sites. Zerrudo (2010) argues that urban planning in the Philippines often prioritizes commercial expansion over cultural conservation.

Weak Policy Implementation: Despite the existence of national policies such as the National Cultural Heritage Act (RA 10066), enforcement remains weak at the local level. Interviewees cited the absence of heritage officers or technical experts in the LGU as a barrier to policy execution. Timothy and Boyd (2003) stress the importance of localized heritage management structures for effective implementation.

Public Awareness and Engagement: Survey results revealed that only 32% of local residents had visited at least one of the city's main heritage sites in the past year. Awareness was particularly low among younger respondents aged 18–25. This supports findings by Poria et al. (2006), who emphasized that heritage tourism must resonate with local identity to foster community support.

Promotion and Marketing Challenges

Fragmented and Underfunded Campaigns: Tourism promotion in Davao City is often limited to general branding during events like the Kadayawan Festival. There is minimal integration of heritage themes into broader tourism materials. Interviewees noted the lack of heritage trail maps or unified digital platforms showcasing cultural assets.

Limited Digital Engagement: Only one of the surveyed heritage sites had an active website or regularly maintained social media account. This digital gap restricts visibility, especially among younger and international tourists. As noted by Dela Santa (2021), effective digital storytelling is crucial to attracting and educating heritage visitors.

Weak Intersectoral Coordination: The absence of sustained collaboration between the tourism office, schools, and private enterprises was highlighted in interviews. Opportunities for educational tours, community exhibits, and volunteer programs are largely untapped.

DISCUSSION

The findings underscore the multifaceted nature of heritage tourism challenges in Davao City. While cultural assets exist, their preservation and promotion suffer from systemic neglect, policy fragmentation, and public

disengagement. Urban development, although vital for economic growth, must be balanced with heritage protection through zoning, policy enforcement, and incentives for preservation.

Community involvement is crucial. As Dela Santa (2021) notes, local participation in heritage tourism fosters a sense of ownership and sustainability. Educational programs in schools and barangays can also raise awareness about the historical significance of local sites. Initiatives like heritage walks, cultural festivals, and school-led clean-up drives around historical landmarks can foster deeper connections between communities and heritage assets.

Strategically, Davao City could benefit from a comprehensive Heritage Tourism Development Plan (HTDP) that integrates preservation with tourism. The plan should align with national policies but be tailored to local contexts. It should also employ digital tools such as interactive maps, augmented reality apps, and heritage storytelling platforms to enhance visitor engagement. Digital innovations can amplify the reach of promotional campaigns and allow global audiences to engage with Davao's history.

Moreover, training programs for local guides, tourism officers, and site managers can professionalize heritage interpretation and ensure historical accuracy. Partnerships with local universities and NGOs can provide research, volunteers, and creative content for exhibits and educational campaigns.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that while Davao City possesses a wealth of historical sites, their preservation and promotion are hindered by financial limitations, policy gaps, urbanization, and low public awareness. These challenges can be addressed through sustained government support, community engagement, and collaborative marketing strategies.

To ensure the long-term viability of heritage tourism, Davao City must adopt a multi-stakeholder approach that empowers local communities, secures adequate funding, enforces protective policies, and leverages digital innovations. Further research should explore the economic impact of heritage tourism and the effectiveness of proposed promotional campaigns.

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