



ATTRACTING VISITORS IS NOT ENOUGH: CULTURAL HERITAGE, LENGTH OF STAY AND VISITOR SATISFACTION IN A UNESCO WORLD HERITAGE DESTINATION

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Abstract

Tourist destinations in the early stages of development often seek to increase visitor arrivals and extend the length of stay, assuming that these indicators reflect destination development and sustainability. This assumption is particularly relevant in UNESCO cultural heritage destinations, where heritage assets are expected to attract visitors and encourage longer stays. This study examines the relationship between cultural heritage, visitor satisfaction, and length of stay in Gjirokastra, a UNESCO World Heritage Site in Albania. Using a quantitative approach, data were collected through a structured survey of visitors and analysed using multiple linear regression and comparative statistical techniques. Visitor satisfaction was treated as the dependent variable and examined in relation to cultural heritage, service quality, and environmental conditions. The findings reveal that cultural heritage is the strongest determinant of visitor satisfaction ($\beta = 0.387$), followed by services ($\beta = 0.348$) and environmental factors ($\beta = 0.252$). The results also indicate an inverse relationship between length of stay and satisfaction, with one-day visitors reporting the highest satisfaction levels and visitors staying longer than three days reporting the lowest. In contrast, repeat visitors were more satisfied than first-time visitors. The findings further suggest that most visitors engage with only a limited number of attractions despite relatively long stays. The study argues that cultural heritage may

be sufficient to attract visitors but not necessarily to sustain satisfaction during longer visits. Consequently, the long-term sustainability of cultural destinations depends not only on heritage conservation but also on the diversification of tourism experiences.

Keywords: Cultural Heritage Tourism; Destination Sustainability; Visitor Satisfaction; Length of Stay; UNESCO World Heritage; Gjirokastra

INTRODUCTION

Tourism in general, and cultural heritage tourism in particular, has become an increasingly important component of the global tourism industry, reflecting growing demand for authentic experiences, historical environments, and destinations with distinctive cultural identities (Richards, 2021; Timothy, 2011). Beyond its economic significance, cultural tourism is widely recognised as a mechanism for preserving cultural assets, strengthening local identity, and supporting sustainable regional development (UNWTO, 2018; Timothy & Boyd, 2003; Richards, 2021).

Within this context, UNESCO World Heritage Sites occupy a prominent position. World Heritage status not only recognises the Outstanding Universal Value of cultural assets but also tends to increase destination visibility, international recognition, and tourism demand (Yang et al., 2010; Cellini, 2011). While these effects create economic opportunities, they may also generate challenges related to visitor management, conservation pressures, authenticity, and the long-term sustainability of tourism development (Pedersen, 2002; Labadi, 2013).

Visitor satisfaction represents one of the most important indicators of destination performance and tourism sustainability. Previous studies have consistently shown that satisfied visitors are more likely to revisit a destination, recommend it to others, and contribute to its long-term competitiveness (Kozak, 2001; Yoon & Uysal, 2005). Research further demonstrates that visitor satisfaction in cultural destinations is influenced by heritage attractiveness, service quality, and environmental conditions (Chen & Chen, 2010; Prayag et al., 2017).

Despite extensive research on the determinants of visitor satisfaction, limited attention has been paid to whether satisfaction can be maintained as visitor engagement with a destination increases. In particular, evidence remains scarce regarding the relationship between length of stay and visitor satisfaction in UNESCO World Heritage destinations located in developing countries. This issue is especially relevant because longer stays are generally associated with higher tourist expenditure, stronger local economic impacts, and deeper engagement with destination attractions (Barros & Machado, 2010; Richards, 2021). From a

sustainability perspective, destinations increasingly seek to enhance visitor value rather than simply increase visitor numbers.

This study addresses this gap through an empirical analysis of Gjirokastra, a UNESCO World Heritage Site in southern Albania. The study examines whether the cultural heritage resources that attract visitors are capable of sustaining visitor satisfaction during longer stays. Using visitor survey data and quantitative statistical analysis, it investigates the relationship between cultural heritage, visitor satisfaction, and length of stay. By focusing on a UNESCO destination in a developing-country context, the study contributes to the literature on cultural tourism and destination management while providing practical insights for heritage conservation, tourism product diversification, and sustainable destination development (UNWTO, 2018; Prayag et al., 2017).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cultural Heritage and Visitor Satisfaction

Cultural heritage represents one of the primary sources of attractiveness in cultural destinations and an important factor in shaping the tourist experience. The literature suggests that historical, architectural, and cultural assets contribute to visitor satisfaction by providing authenticity, identity, and symbolic value that differentiate a destination from competing alternatives (Richards, 2018; Poria et al., 2006). However, the influence of heritage on satisfaction depends not only on the existence of cultural resources but also on how they are preserved, interpreted, and presented. The quality of interpretation, accessibility, conservation standards, and perceptions of authenticity directly influence visitors' evaluations of a destination (Timothy & Boyd, 2015). Consequently, cultural heritage should be viewed not merely as a tourist attraction but as a central component of the overall visitor experience.

Length of Stay and Destination Sustainability

Length of stay is widely regarded as an important indicator of destination performance, as it is generally associated with higher tourist expenditure, greater local economic benefits, and deeper engagement with the destination's offerings (Sharpley, 2015). For this reason, many destinations seek to extend visitor stays through the diversification of tourism products and experiences. However, the relationship between length of stay and visitor satisfaction remains unclear. While longer stays may reflect the attractiveness of a destination, they may also increase visitors' expectations and their exposure to limitations in service quality, infrastructure, or the diversity of available experiences. This issue is particularly relevant in cultural heritage

destinations, where tourism activity is often concentrated around a limited number of key attractions.

UNESCO Destinations and Experience Diversification

UNESCO World Heritage status enhances the international visibility of destinations and can strengthen their tourism competitiveness (Yang et al., 2010; Cellini, 2011)). However, the literature indicates that this status does not automatically guarantee sustainable tourism development, as many heritage destinations face challenges related to visitor concentration, pressure on heritage resources, and the need to balance conservation objectives with economic development (Labadi, 2013).

In this context, experience diversification has emerged as a key principle of sustainable destination management. The development of complementary attractions, cultural events, thematic routes, and community-based experiences can encourage broader destination exploration, extend visitor stays, and enhance visitor satisfaction (Garrod & Fyall, 2000).

Although a substantial body of literature has examined cultural heritage and visitor satisfaction, empirical evidence on the relationship between length of stay and satisfaction in UNESCO destinations located in developing countries remains limited. This gap is particularly important for destinations that rely primarily on the attractiveness of their cultural heritage assets. By addressing this gap, the present study investigates whether the heritage resources that attract visitors to a UNESCO destination are also capable of maintaining high levels of visitor satisfaction during longer stays.

METHODOLOGY

Study Area and Research Design

This study adopts a quantitative, cross-sectional research design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) to examine the relationship between cultural heritage, visitor satisfaction, and length of stay in Gjirokastra, a UNESCO World Heritage Site in southern Albania and widely regarded as the country's leading cultural heritage tourism destination. The analysis is based on primary data collected through visitor surveys and seeks to identify the determinants of visitor satisfaction and variations across visitor groups.

Sampling Design

The target population consisted of domestic and international visitors who visited Gjirokastra during the study period. Given the absence of a comprehensive sampling frame and the continuous flow of visitors, a non-probability convenience sampling approach was adopted.

Data were collected through face-to-face questionnaires administered at major cultural attractions, including Gjirokastra Castle and the Ethnographic Museum, during different days and time periods to capture a diverse range of visitor profiles. The target sample size was determined using Cochran's (1977) sample size formula. A total of 196 valid questionnaires were collected and included in the final analysis.

Data Collection and Study Variables

Primary data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to visitors in Gjirokastra. The questionnaire gathered demographic and travel-related information and measured visitor perceptions using a five-point Likert scale (Likert, 1932). Visitor satisfaction was specified as the dependent variable, while Cultural Heritage, Services, and Environment were treated as independent variables.

Prior to analysis, all returned questionnaires were screened to ensure data quality and suitability for statistical analysis. Questionnaires containing incomplete responses, substantial missing values, or evident response inconsistencies were excluded from the dataset. The screening process also included checks for potential outliers and abnormal response patterns that could affect the reliability of the results. Only questionnaires meeting the predefined quality criteria were retained for analysis.

The reliability of the survey instrument was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha. The analysis produced a coefficient of 0.861 across the 29 measurement items, indicating good internal consistency and exceeding the minimum threshold of 0.70 commonly recommended in the methodological literature (Hair et al., 2019; Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). This result confirms the reliability of the measurement instrument and supports its suitability for subsequent statistical analysis.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) (Field, 2018). The analytical procedure was carried out in two stages.

First, multiple linear regression analysis was employed to identify the factors influencing visitor satisfaction and to assess the relative contribution of Cultural Heritage, Services, and Environment. Multiple regression was considered appropriate because it enables the simultaneous examination of the effects of several independent variables on a single dependent variable. Prior to model estimation, the assumptions of linear regression, including normality, multicollinearity, and homoscedasticity, were examined and no significant violations were identified.

Second, comparative analyses were performed to investigate differences in visitor satisfaction according to length of stay, visit frequency, and the number of attractions visited. These variables were selected because they represent important indicators of visitor engagement with the destination and provide additional insights into the relationship between visitor behaviour and destination sustainability.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Visitors' Profile

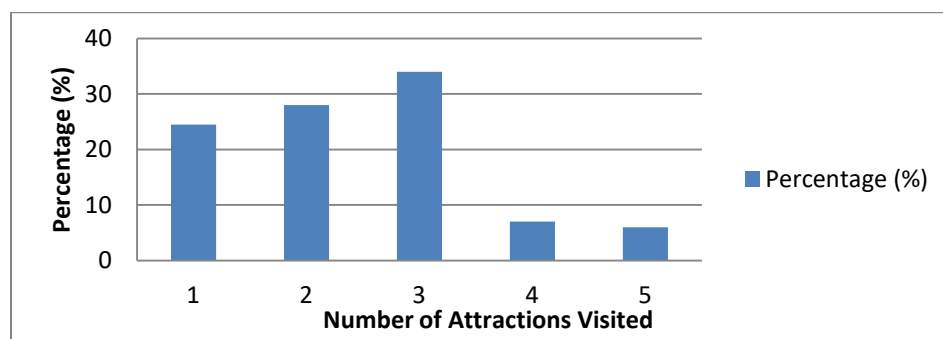
Table 1. Demographic and travel characteristics

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Nationality	Domestic	31	16.0
	International	165	84.0
Length of Stay	1 day	31	16.0
	2–3 days	70	35.5
	>3 days	95	48.5
Frequency of Visit	First visit	143	73.0
	2–3 visits	38	19.5
	>3 visits	15	7.5

Table 1 presents the demographic and travel characteristics of the visitor sample. International visitors represented the majority of respondents (84%), indicating a substantial presence of foreign tourists within the surveyed population. Regarding travel behaviour, 48.5% of respondents reported stays longer than three days, while 73% were visiting Gjirokastra for the first time. These characteristics provide important contextual information for interpreting subsequent analyses of visitor satisfaction, length of stay, and destination loyalty.

Visitor Engagement and Travel Behaviour

Figure 1. Number of Attractions Visited



Visitor engagement was examined through the number of attractions visited during the trip. As illustrated in Figure 1, most respondents visited between one and three attractions, with the largest proportion reporting visits to three attractions (34%), followed by two attractions (28%) and one attraction (24.5%). Only a limited share of visitors reported visiting four (7%) or five attractions (6%). These findings suggest that visitor activity remains concentrated around a relatively small number of attractions. Considering that a substantial proportion of respondents reported stays longer than three days (Table 1), the results may indicate that visitors are not fully engaging with the broader range of tourism assets available within the destination. This pattern highlights opportunities to diversify tourism products and strengthen the integration of cultural, experiential, and community-based attractions.

The findings are consistent with previous research suggesting that destinations characterized by a limited range of tourism experiences often face challenges in increasing visitor engagement, extending tourism expenditure, and distributing tourism benefits more broadly across the destination (Richards, 2018; Timothy, 2011). Encouraging visitors to explore a wider range of attractions could therefore enhance both the quality of the visitor experience and the long-term sustainability of the destination.

Visitor Satisfaction Across Travel Segments

To further explore visitor experiences, satisfaction levels were compared across different visitor segments.

Figure 2. Visitor Satisfaction by Length of Stay

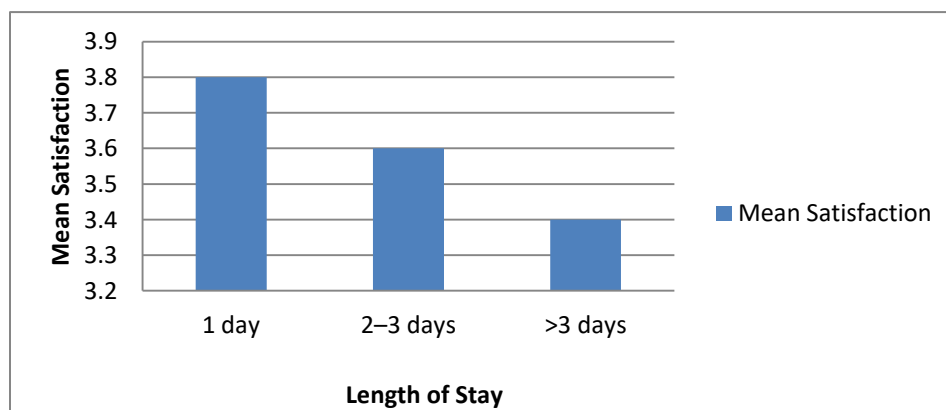


Figure 2 shows that visitor satisfaction tends to decline as length of stay increases. Visitors staying for only one day reported the highest satisfaction levels ($M \approx 3.8$), while those staying for more than three days reported the lowest levels of satisfaction ($M \approx 3.4$).

This finding suggests that although Gjirokastra generates highly positive initial visitor experiences, sustaining similar levels of satisfaction during longer stays may be more challenging. One possible explanation is that visitors who remain in the destination for extended periods become more aware of limitations related to the diversity of attractions, available activities, or supporting tourism services. This interpretation is supported by the results presented in Figure 1, which indicate that most visitors engage with only a limited number of attractions despite relatively long stays among a substantial proportion of respondents.

The findings are consistent with previous research on cultural heritage destinations, which suggests that while heritage assets are effective in attracting visitors, the absence of diversified tourism experiences may reduce engagement and satisfaction during longer visits (Richards, 2021; Timothy, 2011). Consequently, extending visitor stays may require not only the preservation of heritage resources but also the development of complementary tourism products capable of enriching the overall visitor experience.

Figure 3. Visitor Satisfaction by Frequency of Visit

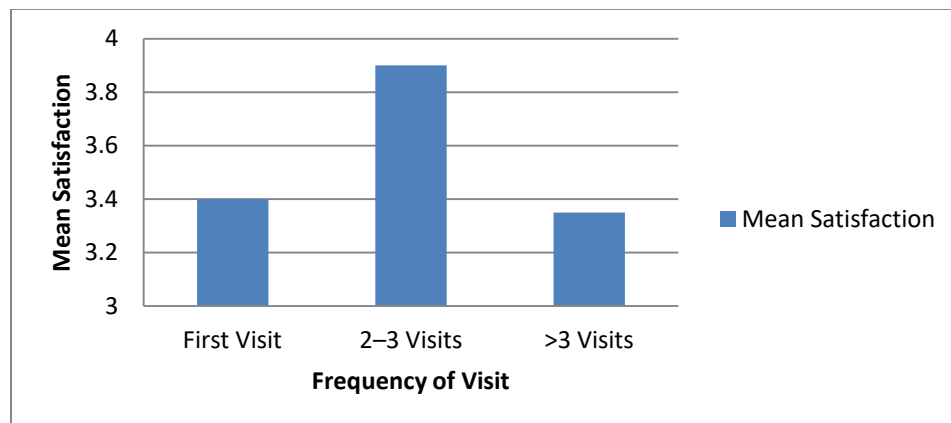


Figure 3 illustrates variations in visitor satisfaction according to the frequency of visits to Gjirokastra. Visitors who had visited the destination two to three times reported the highest satisfaction levels ($M \approx 3.9$), whereas both first-time visitors and those with more than three visits reported lower satisfaction levels ($M \approx 3.4$).

The findings suggest that satisfaction does not increase linearly with repeat visitation. Instead, visitors in the intermediate category (2–3 visits) appear to be the most satisfied segment. One possible explanation is that these visitors have developed greater familiarity with the destination and are better able to appreciate its cultural heritage and tourism offerings, while still experiencing a degree of novelty during their visits.

By contrast, the lower satisfaction levels reported by visitors with more than three visits may indicate that repeated exposure reduces novelty and increases awareness of destination limitations. Similar patterns have been identified in tourism research, where repeat visitors often develop more critical evaluations as their expectations become more sophisticated and experience-based (Chi & Qu, 2008; Yoon & Uysal, 2005).

From a destination management perspective, these findings suggest that maintaining visitor loyalty requires not only attracting repeat visitors but also continuously renewing and diversifying the visitor experience. Cultural events, thematic routes, and new interpretive experiences may help sustain satisfaction among highly loyal visitors who are already familiar with the destination.

Determinants of Visitor Satisfaction

Table 2. Multiple Regression Results for Visitor Satisfaction

Independent Variable	Standardized Beta	t-value	Sig.
Cultural Heritage	0.387	7.253	<0.001
Services	0.348	6.749	<0.001
Environment	0.252	4.817	<0.001

Note: Dependent variable- Visitor Satisfaction.

The final stage of the analysis examined the factors influencing visitor satisfaction through multiple linear regression analysis. The model demonstrated strong explanatory power, accounting for 60.4% of the variance in visitor satisfaction ($R^2 = 0.604$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.598$, $F = 99.581$, $p < 0.001$). This level of explanatory capacity is comparable to previous studies conducted in cultural heritage destinations, where heritage quality, service performance, and environmental conditions have consistently emerged as key determinants of visitor experiences (Chen & Chen, 2010; Prayag et al., 2017).

The results indicate that all three explanatory variables exert a positive and statistically significant influence on visitor satisfaction. Cultural Heritage emerged as the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.387$, $p < 0.001$), followed by Services ($\beta = 0.348$, $p < 0.001$) and Environment ($\beta = 0.252$, $p < 0.001$). These findings provide strong support for the study's central argument that heritage resources represent the primary driver of visitor satisfaction within UNESCO cultural destinations.

The prominence of Cultural Heritage highlights the importance of authenticity, historical significance, and the overall quality of heritage assets in shaping visitor evaluations. This finding is consistent with previous research suggesting that perceived authenticity and heritage value are among the most influential determinants of satisfaction in cultural tourism settings (McKercher & du Cros, 2002; Timothy & Boyd, 2003). At the same time, the significant effects of Services and Environment indicate that heritage attractions alone are insufficient to ensure positive visitor experiences. Supporting services and destination conditions remain essential components of overall satisfaction.

When considered alongside the previous findings, the regression results provide additional insight into the challenges of sustaining visitor satisfaction. Although cultural heritage strongly contributes to positive evaluations, satisfaction tends to decline among visitors with longer stays, while most respondents engage with only a limited number of attractions. This suggests that heritage resources are highly effective in attracting visitors and generating positive initial experiences, but maintaining satisfaction over extended stays may require greater diversification of tourism products and experiences.

Overall, the findings reinforce the central role of cultural heritage in destination competitiveness while highlighting the importance of complementary services and experience diversification for enhancing visitor satisfaction and supporting the long-term sustainability of the destination.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study examined the determinants of visitor satisfaction in Gjirokastra, a UNESCO World Heritage destination, with particular attention to the relationship between cultural heritage, visitor behaviour, and destination sustainability. The findings demonstrate that cultural heritage exerts the strongest influence on visitor satisfaction ($\beta = 0.387$), followed by services ($\beta = 0.348$) and environmental quality ($\beta = 0.252$). These results confirm the central role of heritage attractiveness in shaping visitor experiences and highlight the importance of preserving and effectively managing cultural assets as a foundation for destination competitiveness.

At the same time, the findings reveal important challenges for long-term destination sustainability. Although overall satisfaction levels were positive, satisfaction declined as the length of stay increased. Visitors staying for one day reported higher satisfaction levels than those remaining longer, suggesting that while Gjirokastra performs successfully as a short-stay cultural destination, it faces difficulties in maintaining visitor engagement over extended visits.

Visitor behaviour provides a plausible explanation for this pattern. Despite relatively long stays among many respondents, most visitors reported visiting only a limited number of

attractions. This concentration of tourism activity around a small number of heritage assets suggests that opportunities for new experiences become increasingly constrained over time, limiting the destination's capacity to sustain satisfaction among longer-stay visitors.

The analysis also highlights a positive relationship between satisfaction and repeat visitation. Visitors who had visited Gjirokastra two to three times reported the highest satisfaction levels, indicating that cultural heritage not only attracts visitors but can also contribute to destination loyalty when supported by positive visitor experiences. This finding supports the notion of a heritage-driven loyalty mechanism linking heritage attractiveness, visitor satisfaction, and repeat visitation.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that heritage conservation should remain a strategic priority, but preservation alone is unlikely to sustain destination competitiveness. Greater emphasis should be placed on diversifying tourism experiences through thematic routes, cultural events, interpretation programmes, and community-based initiatives that encourage visitors to engage with a broader range of attractions. Such measures could enhance satisfaction during longer stays while increasing visitor expenditure and local economic benefits.

Overall, the study concludes that the long-term sustainability of Gjirokastra depends not only on protecting its cultural heritage but also on its ability to sustain visitor satisfaction as length of stay increases by transforming heritage resources into a diversified and engaging visitor experience. Sustainable tourism development should therefore balance heritage conservation, visitor satisfaction, destination loyalty, and economic development within an integrated destination management framework.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has several limitations. First, the analysis focuses on a single UNESCO World Heritage destination, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Second, the cross-sectional design captures visitor perceptions at a specific point in time and does not account for changes in destination performance over time. Third, the study considers only visitor perspectives; future research could incorporate the views of local residents, tourism businesses, and destination management organizations to provide a more comprehensive understanding of destination sustainability.

Future research could further explore the roles of destination governance, authenticity, cultural interpretation, and experience diversification in shaping visitor satisfaction, loyalty, and long-term destination sustainability.

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Conflict of interests

We confirm that there is no conflict of interest associated with this publication.

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