



Cultural Tourism: An Integrative Review

Turismo Cultural: Uma Revisão Integrativa

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Received: 23.09.2025; Revisions: 15.10.2025; Accepted: 02.12.2025

Abstract

This review of cultural tourism covers the period 2019-2025, which has seen considerable growth in research output. The literature has been affected by a number of contextual factors, including the COVID-19 pandemic, new technologies, policy shifts and growing attention for intangible cultural heritage (ICH), storytelling and the role of place. The cultural tourism literature is also becoming more fragmented through the emergence of a number of niches, such as gastronomy and contents tourism. Chinese scholars are also beginning to have a major role in the field, stimulated by national policies to develop 'Cultural Creative Tourism'. This also points to further democratisation of cultural tourism, away from its roots as an elite pastime. There is also growing attention for cultural tourism in rural areas, which has also helped to stimulate research on ICH. Recent research also highlights research gaps, including cultural tourism governance, the impacts of new technologies and social media, and the role of place curation strategies. Future research will need to tackle emerging issues, such as the role of destination coolness, the shift from destination management to place management and the nature of relationships between visitors and residents.

Keywords: Cultural tourism, cultural heritage, new technologies, gastronomy, storytelling, creativity.

Resumo

Esta revisão sobre o turismo cultural cobre o período de 2019 a 2025, durante o qual se verificou um crescimento considerável na produção científica. A literatura tem sido influenciada por vários fatores contextuais, incluindo a pandemia de COVID-19, as novas tecnologias, mudanças de políticas públicas e a crescente atenção dada ao património cultural imaterial (PCI), ao *storytelling* e ao papel do lugar. A literatura sobre turismo cultural está também a tornar-se mais fragmentada devido ao aparecimento de vários nichos, como a gastronomia e o "Turismo Mediático". Os investigadores chineses começam igualmente a assumir um papel relevante, impulsionados por políticas nacionais destinadas a desenvolver o chamado "Turismo Cultural Criativo". Isto aponta também para uma maior democratização do turismo cultural, afastando-se das suas origens enquanto atividade de elites. Observa-se igualmente uma atenção crescente ao turismo cultural em áreas rurais, o que tem contribuído para estimular a investigação sobre PCI. A investigação recente evidencia ainda lacunas, incluindo a governação do turismo cultural, os impactos das novas tecnologias e das redes sociais, bem como o papel das estratégias de curadoria do lugar. Futuras investigações deverão abordar questões emergentes, como o papel de "coolness" do destino, a transição da gestão do destino para a gestão do lugar e a natureza das relações entre visitantes e residentes.

Palavras-chave: Turismo cultural, património cultural, novas tecnologias, gastronomia, *storytelling*, criatividade.

1. Introduction

Cultural tourism is argued to be one of the biggest segments of global tourism. It is also often quoted as being one of the fastest growing tourism markets worldwide, even though evidence for this is lacking (Richards, 2021). It is not surprising, therefore, that cultural tourism attracts a great deal of attention from both policymakers and academics. A recent bibliography lists over 1500 cultural tourism sources (Richards, 2025), with a particularly sharp increase in publications since 2016. As the cultural tourism literature has grown, many studies have also attempted to analyse the cultural tourism literature.

This growing body of literature indicates a pressing need to summarise and synthesise the current state of knowledge and the evolution of perspectives on cultural tourism, also in relation to other fields. The standard tool for such a task is a literature review. A recent review of work on Cultural and Creative Tourism in rural areas, for example, identified 13 literature reviews in the field, all of which had been published since 2018 (Richards et al., 2025). Most of these literature reviews are structured reviews produced in very similar ways. They search sources on WOS or Scopus, or both, and then produce a bibliometric analysis that shows key themes, key authors, countries of publication and universities. It often appears that these reviews actually add little to our knowledge and understanding of the field. In addition, not an overwhelmingly quantitative approach, they often pay little or no attention to the context of cultural tourism. There is precious little mention of policy, of wider economic developments or cultural and social issues that might affect the literature being produced.

The current review therefore attempts to do something slightly different. It is not based on a quantitative bibliometric analysis, or algorithmic curation. This approach seeks to avoid the tendency to focus on the quantitative volume of research output and instead identify patterns and important outliers that can provide indications of fruitful future research directions.



Curation is a process of value creation through organisation and selection (Mars, Schau & Thorp, 2023). In this case, the curation process is used to organise and select from the recent cultural tourism literature of the field. The key elements of this structure include a focus on literature reviews, which synthesise a large volume of previous research, books, which act as incubators of ideas in contrast to the more limited article format, and the inclusion of sources in languages other than English, which serves to broaden the cultural and intellectual view of the field (Richards et al., 2022). The meta-review process has previously been employed by Richards et al. (2025) to construct a view of cultural tourism in rural areas.

The current review covers the period 2018-2025, ranging from the publication of a widely cited review of the field (Richards, 2018) to the present. The intention is therefore to build on and extend previous research, rather than going over old ground. According to Snyder (2019), an integrative literature review should assess, critique, and synthesize the literature to enable new insights to emerge. This review aims to develop new insights from recent research on cultural tourism, highlighting new trends and research gaps.

The paper is structured as follows. Firstly, the methods used to identify suitable sources are described. The contextual factors affecting the recent development of cultural tourism are then briefly considered. A meta-analysis of previous literature reviews then outlines some of the major trends in the literature, and recent books on cultural tourism are also specifically considered. The paper concludes with some considerations for future research perspectives.

2. Methods

A search was conducted on Scopus in August 2025 to identify articles and books related to cultural tourism, and in particular literature reviews, published between 2019 and 2025. The titles and keywords of articles were searched for the terms “cultural tourism” or “cultural heritage tourism”. This generated a total of 844 items, which were screened for relevance. This further screening left 356 items, which were ranked in terms of relevance and citations before the selection was reviewed. The database was examined for books dealing with cultural tourism, which generated 13 titles. The search was repeated with the terms “literature review” or “bibliometric” to identify specific literature review studies. This yielded 70 sources, and after screening 30 literature reviews were retained for analysis. Additional searching was then conducted for the same terms on Google Scholar in order to identify potentially relevant sources not identified via the Scopus search, particularly in languages other than English (which accounted for 89% of results in Scopus).

Given the qualitative focus of the current paper, no specific bibliometric analysis was conducted.

3. The changing context of cultural tourism

Recent years have seen a number of important contextual developments for the study of cultural tourism. These include the effects of Covid, the virtual pivot in tourism and culture and other technological developments, the rise of Intangible Culture Heritage, and shifts in tourism and cultural policy.

Covid-19 and cultural tourism

The Covid Pandemic has been the subject of an immense number of studies, so there is no need to go into detail here. In terms of cultural tourism, COVID-19 delivered a triple whammy of cultural institutions closing, events being cancelled and tourists not able to travel. Specific studies of cultural tourism during the Covid Pandemic included a study of visitors to cultural heritage attractions in Southern Moravia (Tuzová, Vaishar, Šťastná & Urbanová, 2023). This indicated that visits to cultural attractions declined more than to natural heritage attractions, and cultural attractions also recovered more slowly afterwards.

In Portugal, Richards and Fernandes (2023) found that COVID-19 significantly changed the profile and activities of more domestic tourists at most sites, with fewer visitors staying away from home and fewer touring holidays. However, levels of satisfaction and intention to return remained high, as did perceived authenticity. The increased demand for inland areas was as a hopeful sign for the post-Covid period. Borowiecki, Pedersen and Mitchell (2025) used big data to trace the recent development of cultural tourism in France, Spain and Denmark. They found a Covid-related shift away from visits to museums, sights and landmarks towards nature and parks, which was particularly marked in the case of Denmark.

Now it seems that the post-Covid recovery is almost complete, and most tourists have already had their fill of ‘revenge tourism’. There has been a rebound in cultural tourism, also in cities, with ‘overtourism’ once again being discussed in relation to cultural tourism (Cerisola & Panzera, 2025). This growth is occurring at the same time that cultural supply is increasing, indicating that the supply-driven boost to cultural tourism previously seen in the 1990s (Richards, 2001) is being repeated. The difference is that this effect is not just evident in Europe, but a global phenomenon, marked by the opening of museums in Abu Dhabi (Guggenheim, Zayed National Museum), New York (remodeling of the Frick and the New Museum), London (V&A Storehouse), Paris (Cartier Foundation of Contemporary Art) and Almaty (Tselinny Center of Contemporary Culture) (Roux, 2025).



New technologies

The Covid Pandemic gave a boost to digital and virtual cultural travel, as noted in many studies (Zheng, Huang & Oraltay, 2023; Marasco, 2020). As Ammirato, Felicetti, Linzalone & Carlucci (2022) note, this has led to the growth of new cultural tourism business models, including the use of Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR) to present cultural content.

New technologies have also increasingly transformed the way tourists gather information and book their travel. For cultural tourism the effects have been evident in the growth of timed ticketing for major attractions, and the effects of social media and electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM) on travel decisions. Peco-Torres, Polo-Peña and Frías-Jamilena (2021) analyse the impact of social media on brand personality, and Mele, Kerkhof and Cantoni (2021) consider promotion through Instagram, while Pan (2021) analyses the impact of TikTok on consumer decision making. To date, TikTok has not been as heavily analysed in cultural tourism, but the popularity of this platform in China is increasing research attention. Pan notes the rise of Tik-Tok 'celebrity cities' in China, and 'TikTok queues' have also appeared European cities such as Amsterdam and Paris, particularly around food outlets (Fischbacher, 2025).

The growth of TikTok queues is an example of the spread of specific social practices related to tourism (Bargeman & Richards, 2020). Cultural tourism itself can be conceptualised as a specific form of social practice, characterised by a focus of attention on cultural phenomena and outputs related to learning and distinction (Richards, 2021). Practice-based research on cultural tourism has included studies of Viennese coffeehouse culture (Chen & Wu, 2019) and the role of museums in cultural tourism (Wu, Tong, Wall & Ying, 2021).

Tourism and cultural policy

Cultural tourism development is also affected by policy shifts and tourism governance arrangements. As Harfst, Syrbe, Kern, Wirth, Sandriester, Pstrocka-Rak and Dolzblasz (2024) report, policy issues in tourism have gradually faded from the literature, and there is relatively little discussion of cultural tourism governance. They argue for an actor-centred approach to the analysis of cultural tourism governance, in which the (cultural) "tourism product not understood as the sum of individual offers but as a collective, authentic product of a local responsive tourism network" (p. 2).

This network approach has also seen a resurgence in place-based analysis of cultural tourism, and a growing recognition of cultural tourism as a placemaking tool (Richards, 2020). On the one hand, this trend has been stimulated by places seeking to distinguish themselves in crowded tourism markets, and on the other hand the use of 'the local' as a marker of authenticity (Russo & Richards, 2016). The globalisation of culture has weakened the link between specific locations and distinctive cultural forms, as previously analysed in terms of distinctive national or regional culture, as Santos (2004) did in the case of Portugal.

Gastronomy is becoming an important marker of places and local identities, based on new-found attention for local foods, slow food and sustainable food chains (Ren & Fusté-Forné, 2024). Gastronomy has been an important vehicle for cultural tourism development in recent years, building on the growing popularity of food and cooking in society in general, and the sensory power of food as an element of place. At the same time, food is increasingly linked to national identities, stimulated by 'gastrodiplomacy' policies to boost the image of foods by different countries. Nazir, Kumar, Sangaran, Ali and Valeri (2025) describe gastrodiplomacy efforts by Malaysia to gain UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) recognition as a tourism marketing tool, and Lee and Kim (2021) analyse Singapore's efforts to gain a UNESCO ICH listing for Hawker culture. There is little doubt that populist narratives will drive increased efforts in this direction in future. There is an emerging literature examining the development of 'gastropopulism', or the use of local foods to promote nationalist agendas (Starita, 2022), also buoyed by the spread of food festivals in rural areas (Fisker, Kwiatkowski & Hjalager, 2021). These developments provide an important counterweight to the use of globalised and fusion cuisine as a marker of cosmopolitan culture in major cities (Scarpato, 2003).

Intangible Cultural Heritage

One of the important cultural tourism resources that has gained increased attention is Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), particularly because of the growing influence of the UNESCO ICH list. A review of ICH in tourism by Qiu, Zuo & Zhang (2022) notes the rise of food tourism, sacred knowledge, traditional management systems, legends, and myths, while "social practices, rituals and festive events" has arguably become a 'hot topic'. They also note that ecotourism, culinary tourism, festival tourism, and religious tourism are often related to ICH tourism research and will continue to grow in the near future.

These trends are linked to the intangibilisation of cultural tourism production and consumption and the growing integration between culture and place. Romagnoli (2019) emphasises that ICH is supported by a community based in a location, and without their support it is unsustainable. However, many studies ignore how ICH integrates with the contemporary lifestyles of community



members, or what policies are needed to ensure the continuation of social practices supporting the production and reproduction of ICH.

Many recent studies have also analysed emerging intangible niches within the cultural tourism field, arguing that a new approach is needed given the distinct nature of the subject matter. For example, Franklin (2018) argues for a separate category of 'arts tourism', which is "currently obscured under cultural tourism's voluminous bounds" (p. 399). Another cultural tourism niche that has received increasing attention is popular cultural tourism, and the related field of contents tourism. Gibson and Connell (2025) identify popular cultural tourism as largely participatory, such as dressing up for The Elvis Festival in Parkes, Australia, or Harry Potter at Kings Cross Station. They also include running marathons and attending a Taylor Swift concert under popular cultural tourism. As Simons (2019) notes, the rise of cosplay and other forms of fantasy are also having an impact on cultural tourism as people play with and perform different identities. The move of cultural tourism into the intangible realm of the media also implies speeding up the consumption of cultural symbols, as well as the concentration of attention via blockbuster exhibitions. The fact that contents tourism is particularly prevalent in Asia also challenges the predominant Anglophone and Eurocentric approaches to cultural tourism research. As Gibson & Connell (2025) point out, Japanese, Korean, and Chinese contents tourism are based different cultural forms and meanings than the prevalent Western analyses of cultural tourism.

Creativity and storytelling

A significant development has been the rise of creative tourism (Richards & Raymond, 2000). This is a marker of the 'creative turn' in tourism and growing attention for self-development and a search for alternative experiences. Creative tourism was originally linked to individual creative experiences provided via workshops and courses, but creativity has been increasingly integrated into tourism in general via co-creation between producers and consumers (Binkhorst, 2009) and the development of creative communities (Duxbury & Richards, 2019).

Creative tourism has also become an area of policy development, with programmes and networks in Europe, Brazil, Thailand and Indonesia (Richards, 2020). Creative and cultural tourism policies have also been integrated in China, where the concept of Cultural Creative Tourism has been given prominence in national policy (Richards et al, 2024).

Zhang, Ruan and Yang (2021) argue the "high level of integration of culture and tourism in China" produces a new tourism experience, which uses interactive learning to increase cultural understanding, helping to valorize and protect traditional culture. They emphasise the role of Cultural Creative Tourism in projecting national culture and increasing cultural understanding, turning static into dynamic culture. The concept of Cultural Creative Tourism is very broad, and includes visits to tangible heritage attractions as well as creative performances and cultural landscapes.

A key critique of the creative tourism approach, however, has been the apparent lack of creativity in many experiences grouped under this label. As Richards and Marques (2012) point out, there is a continuum of approaches to creative tourism that ranges from more active involvement and learning experiences towards more passive, consumption-related experiences. Creativity is also often posited as something different and isolated from everyday life. However, as Ong and Frohlick (2025) indicate in their analysis of tourism narratives, "creativity also presupposes the establishment of routine, of sedimented practice which establishes the contours of normality or the everyday. Without these structures, there is no difference, no resistance, and no possibility of action and re-action. Without the box, there is no potential for thinking outside the box." This indicates a need to re-think the role of creativity in the context of tourism.

Creativity and storytelling have become increasingly important for linking cultural elements together, particularly with the growth of ICH (Roque, 2022). With the rise of digital media, storytelling has also become digitalised and incorporated into cultural tourism interpretation (Cahyani, Mardani & Widianingsih, 2023). This is common at cultural sites and in museums, and increasingly storytelling is integrated into mobile devices to enhance the tourist experience in situ (Leong, Yeh, Zhou, Hung & Huan, 2024). Garrison and Wallace (2025) examine the *Outlander* book series by Diana Gabaldon (also popularised through an American television series) and the impact of these stories on tourism in Scotland. Sites linked with *Outlander*, such as Culloden Battlefield, have reported a doubling in visitor numbers. Garrison and Wallace (2025) argue humans are 'storytelling animals' who are attracted to stories and places linked to them. They highlight processes of 'story-weaving' in which stories are actively engaged in and interwoven.

Storytelling is also stimulated by the use of new technologies. TikTok is well suited to storytelling, which can also generate viral coverage of cultural tourism attractions (Du, Liechty, Santos & Park, 2022). Wei, Li, Zhang and Liu (2025) argue that TikTok creates ritualised experience that interweaves real and imaginary, online and offline. A platform ecosystem develops between tourists, online users, TikTok, and the destination forming a value co-creation network. The storyline is not just made by producers, but co-created with visitors, and links the virtual and real worlds into the story.



The growing importance of narrative has also increased attention for processes of curation in cultural tourism (Richards, 2024). Xu, Shi & Chen (2025) argue that large museums are evolving from traditional cultural tourism service provision to the creation of new experiences. Luo and Graburn (2024) indicate that the ‘museum boom’ in China has created a ‘museal layer’ within major cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, generating a system of place curation to stimulate cultural tourism. Ord and Behr (2023) examine the curation of hotel spaces in response to the UNESCO City of Music designation for Glasgow and its positioning as “a hip, contemporary, global music destination” (p. 15). They argue the Citizen M hotel aims to develop a “curated chaos”, including artworks, books, designer furniture and souvenirs, which provide input to guests’ “individual identity projects”. The ‘artification of hospitality’ is also highlighted by Addis, Nasino, Massi and Camilleri (2024) who see art hotels as a new frontier in the field.

Curation is also linked to attempts to create certain atmospheres in tourism spaces and even whole cities. Smith, Pinke-Sziva, Berezvai and Buczkowska-Gołębek (2022) report that visitors to Budapest still come mainly for cultural reasons, but their motivations are increasingly linked to intangible elements such as atmosphere and gastronomy. Curation is also important in developing eventfulness. There has been a significant growth in cultural events in recent decades, particularly in major cities such as Milan (d'Angella, Friel, Miglietta & Sainaghi, 2021), London and Manchester (Finkel & Platt, 2020), adding to animation the curated landscape of the destination, or the ‘curascape’.

Looking back over the period 2018 to 2025, such trends have stimulated a significant growth and diversification in the cultural tourism literature, with growing fragmentation into cultural tourism niches, such as storytelling, narrative and curation, creative tourism and gastronomy. These trends are also reflected in the many literature reviews produced on cultural tourism over this period, as indicated in the following section.

4. Literature reviews on cultural tourism, 2019-2025

In recent years there have been many reviews produced on cultural tourism, reflecting a growing trend in academic research in general. We identified a total of 30 relevant literature reviews produced between 2019 and 2025 (Table 1).

Table 1: Literature reviews on cultural tourism from 2019 to 2025

Authors	Title	Citations
Su, X., Li, X., & Kang, Y. (2019).	A bibliometric analysis of research on intangible cultural heritage using CiteSpace	228
Khanom, S., Moyle, B., Scott, N., & Kennelly, M. (2019).	Host-guest authentication of intangible cultural heritage: A literature review and conceptual model	72
Zhang, S., Liang, J., Su, X., Chen, Y., & Wei, Q. (2023).	Research on global cultural heritage tourism based on bibliometric analysis	56
de Santana, J. C., Maracajá, K. F. B., & de Araújo Machado, P. (2021).	Cultural tourism and tourism sustainability: a mapping of the scientific performance of the web of science.	38
Vada, S., Dupre, K., & Zhang, Y. (2023).	Route tourism: a narrative literature review	34
Chen, J., Guo, Z., Xu, S., Law, R., Liao, C., He, W., & Zhang, M. (2022).	A bibliometric analysis of research on intangible cultural heritage tourism using CiteSpace: The perspective of China.	29
Benhaida, S., Saddou, H., Safaa, L., Perkumiene, D., & Labanauskas, V. (2024).	Acquirements of three decades of literature on cultural tourism	28
Kasemsarn, K., Harrison, D., & Nickpour, F. (2023).	Applying inclusive design and digital storytelling to facilitate cultural tourism: A review and initial framework	28
Lin, X., Shen, Z., Teng, X., & Mao, Q. (2024).	Cultural routes as cultural tourism products for heritage conservation and regional development: A systematic review.	21
Geçikli, R. M., Turan, O., Lachytová, L., Dağlı, E., Kasalak, M. A., Uğur, S. B., & Guven, Y. (2024).	Cultural heritage tourism and sustainability: A bibliometric analysis	16
Iakovaki, E., Konstantakis, M., Teneketzi, A., & Konstantakis, G. (2023).	Analyzing cultural routes and their role in advancing cultural heritage management within tourism: A systematic review with a focus on the integration of digital technologies	15
Díaz Ortega, R., Aguirre Montero, A., & López Sánchez, J. A. (2023).	The conceptual bibliometric analysis applied to the tourism-culture binomial 1995-2020	14
Bozkurt, İ., Deniz, G., & Günden, Y. (2022).	A bibliometric analysis of publications within the scope of cultural heritage tourism and digitalization	12
Judijanto, L., & Salim, B. S. (2024).	A Bibliometric Analysis of the Use of Augmented Reality Technology in Enhancing Cultural Tourism Experience	12
Quiroz-Fabra, J., Valencia-Arias, A., Londoño-Celis, W., & García-Pineda, V. (2022).	Technological tools for knowledge apprehension and promotion in the cultural and heritage tourism sector: Systematic literature review	12
Díaz-Pompa, F., Serrano-Leyva, B., Feria-Velázquez, F. F., & Cruz-Aguilera, N. (2022).	Los museos en el turismo cultural: un estudio bibliométrico en Scopus	11
Zhang, Z., & Guo, M. (2022).	Change of tourism organizations: Implications from a review of cultural tourism research	8



Mazlan, C. A. N., Abdullah, M. H., Hashim, N. S. N., Wahid, N. A., Pisali, A., Uyub, A. I., & Hidayatullah, R. (2025).	Discovery the intersection of performing arts in cultural tourism: a scoping review	5
Mazlan, C. A. N., Abdullah, M. H., Nor Hashim, N. S., & Abdul Wahid, N. (2025).	Music in cultural tourism: insights from a dual approach of scoping review and bibliometric analysis	5
Seočanac, M., Đorđević, N., & Pantović, D. (2024).	Cultural tourism in rural areas: mapping research trends through bibliometric and content analysis	5
Fasone, V., & Puglisi, M. (2024).	Technological innovation in cultural tourism: a systematic literature review	4
Isidoro, S. S., & Herranz, A. Á. (2023).	Bibliometric analysis on cultural tourism and depopulation in rural areas	4
Kodalak, O., & Baltacı, M. (2023).	Bibliometric analysis of studies on cultural heritage tourism	4
Mazlan, C. A. N., Abdullah, M. H., Hashim, N. S. H. N., Wahid, N. A., Nor, N. M., Attan, M. N., & Hidayatullah, R. (2024).	Performing arts in the landscape of cultural tourism: A mini-review	4
Fontan Kohler, A. & Antonio Digiampietri, L. (2021).	Turismo cultural: análise bibliométrica e de redes sociais do campo de turismo no Brasil, 1990 2018	3
Pantović, D., Vasović, N., & Mura, L. (2023).	Bibliometric analysis of contemporary trends in cultural tourism	2
Palermo, A., Chieffallo, L., & Virgilio, S. (2023).	The identification of cultural tourism geographies: results from a systematic literature review	1
Wang, Z., Alli, H., & Md Yusoff, I. S. (2025).	The Application of Interaction Design in Cultural Heritage Tourism: A Systematic Literature Review	1
Khan, M. A., & Guleria, S. (2024, June).	A Bibliometric Analysis of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Tourism	0
Pérez-Brito, J. M., Serrano-Leyva, B., Díaz-Pompa, F., & Feria-Velázquez, F. F. (2024).	Los museos en el turismo cultural: un estudio bibliométrico en Scopus	0
Total citations		678

Many of these literature reviews concentrate on cultural heritage tourism and ICH, which has become an increasing policy concern (Richards et al., 2025). Some important themes are also highlighted within the overall cultural tourism field, including music and performing arts, rural areas, technology and digitalisation, gastronomy and cultural routes.

The increased application of technology in cultural tourism is reflected in six reviews dealing with digital technologies and innovation. For example, Quiroz-Fabra et al. (2022) identify gamification and e-Learning as specific applications of technology in cultural tourism, including the development of serious games, and gamification techniques within varied scenarios. Gastronomy is highlighted as a major growth area by Zhang and Guo (2022), who see this as one of the most important sub-themes of cultural tourism research. Gastronomy also relates to increased attention for cultural tourism in rural areas, where food and food-related events provide an important basis for experiences (Fisker, Kwiatkowski & Hjalager, 2021).

Most reviews are quantitative and bibliometric in approach, and they reveal some key trends in the literature. In their review of cultural tourism geographies, Palermo, Chieffallo and Virgilio (2023) identify a growing link between tourism and cultural heritage in the literature, with increased attention for intangible heritage. The tourism and heritage link is also reflected in the main keywords in the reviews. Chen et al. (2022) note that “cultural tourism”, “authenticity”, “sustainable development” and “protection (or conservation)” are common topics. De Santana, Maracajá and de Araújo Machado (2021) also found seven main themes, including tourism perspectives, identity, residents' and visitors' perceptions, cultural tourism and social capital, and cultural conservation attitudes. More recently, they note the emergence of communication, authenticity, augmented reality and visitor experience.

A number of reviews deal with specific cultural tourism niches, such as music tourism, which Mazlan, Abdullah, Nor Hashim and Abdul Wahid (2025) argue contributes to cultural preservation, regional identity, and economic growth. They highlight the potential of augmented and virtual reality in music tourism, while also arguing the need for inclusive strategies to ensure authenticity and sustainability. Cultural routes are also attracting more attention, with two reviews on this topic. Vada, Dupre and Zhang (2023) suggest route-based tourism is becoming more personalised, and the use of technology is advancing rapidly. However, research on cultural routes has been largely confined to the global North, with less attention for emerging destinations.

Most literature reviews note the considerable growth of cultural tourism research (although none analyse this in relation to the academic literature as a whole). They also often note the leading position of China among the producers of cultural tourism research, which is reflected in six of the reviews having lead authors based in China. Chen et al. (2022) made a specific study of the Chinese literature, and found that “cultural tourism”, “authenticity”, “sustainable development” and “protection (or conservation)” were common topics. Chinese authors were particularly likely to focus on the relationship between ICH protection and tourism development, research on the development model, and stakeholder research in tourism development.



Chen et al. (2022) note that cultural tourism in China has developed rapidly in recent years, with an evolution from an emphasis on Cultural Heritage Protection to the Comprehensive Development of Cultural Heritage and most recently, more attention for consumer behaviour. Cultural tourism research in China has been stimulated by national policies driving the integration of culture and tourism. This is reflected in the literature by studies of Cultural Creative Tourism policies in China, which seeks to link Culture, seen as an expression of national identity, to Creativity, envisaged as a means of increasing tourists' understanding of culture and their engagement with it (Zhang, Ruan & Yang, 2021).

The main themes that emerge from the reviews include authenticity, sustainability, cultural heritage and identity, technology and gastronomy. Areas that seem to have received less attention include social aspects of cultural tourism, such as relationships between residents and visitors, and governance issues. The analysis of literature reviews reveals a fairly mechanistic and uncritical approach, based largely on quantitative, bibliometric analysis. The main findings often relate to the frequency of keywords, most prolific authors and clusters of themes and authorship. However, these findings are rarely contextualised, for example in terms of the policy frameworks in areas where research is being produced, or the disciplinary background of the authors. There is also little consideration of how trends in cultural tourism research map onto other areas of tourism research or link to other disciplines. There is also a fairly uncritical approach to cultural tourism and its various niches as growing areas of research. Although Richards (2025) provides empirical evidence for an increase in cultural tourism literature as a proportion of tourism research, none of the reviews analysed here consider the position of their subject matter within the wider field. As academic production as a whole has grown dramatically in recent years, it is to be expected that publications will also increase in most sub-fields.

As a number of reviews indicate, China is a major driver of this growth, spurred on by a growing number of UNESCO World Heritage Sites (WHS), intangible heritage designations and the integration of national tourism and cultural policies. This also reflects a wider global trend towards the democratisation of cultural tourism, which has graduated from being a niche tourism market for highly educated consumers to being a broad field composed of many distinct niches. Terminology has developed to take account of this change, with many new niches being identified and conjunct terms such as Cultural Creative Tourism emerging.

As in previous decades, the scope of culture engaged by cultural tourism has also expanded. In the last 20 years this has perhaps been most obvious in urban environments, where subcultures have provided a rich stream of cultural content for tourism in the form of street art, new gastronomic trends and creative clusters. As Roberts and Townsend (2016) note, however, cultural capital is also expanding in rural areas through contemporary creative processes, cultural routes, community arts, creative hubs and clusters, crafts and archives. They argue this provides a broader perspective than the cluster approach often found in cities towards a wider role for creatives in the community. This should also provide new opportunities for rural cultural tourism in the future.

5. Recent books on cultural tourism

There have been a number of significant book publications in recent years that have expanded and deepened our understanding of cultural tourism. Books often provide a more reflexive approach to their subject matter than articles, which are constrained by journal page limits and standardised formats. In this section we review the books we identified dealing specifically with cultural tourism since 2018.

The volume *Cultural Heritage and Tourism: An Introduction* by Dallen Timothy (2020) is the second edition of this comprehensive textbook. We are introduced to cultural heritage as "one of the most salient elements of the global tourism system". Heritage tourism refers to travellers experiencing built heritage, living culture or manifestations of art, both tangible and intangible. Timothy recognises a large overlap between cultural and heritage tourism, which he argues is not confined to the past. The book covers the complexities of dealing with heritage and its interpretation, including issues of amnesia and contested heritage – now becoming all too topical with debates about diversity policies in the USA. As Timothy notes "there are few tourism resources that are as political as heritage." He deals with a wide range of issues, including commodification, indigenous cultural tourism and the treatment of the industrial past. In concluding reflections on 'The Future of the Past' the book touches on many themes in recent literature reviews, including authenticity, the link with other tourism sectors, cultural routes and technology. He also identifies notable research gaps, including cross-border cultural tourism and the heritage of border.

Another updated publication is *Cultural Tourism* by Du Cros and McKercher (2020). Originally entitled *Cultural Tourism: The Partnership Between Tourism and Cultural Heritage* this revamped version still attempts to "bridge the gap between cultural tourism and cultural and heritage management" by adopting "an umbrella approach" to the field. It pays attention to the assets that form the basis of cultural tourism, including tangible and intangible cultural heritage, as well as the profile of cultural tourists, supported by McKercher and Du Cros' (2003) cultural tourism typology. This revised edition provides new content on sustainability, climate change, the threat of de-globalization, overtourism and social media. There is also more attention for the development of economy through sections on experience creation, accessibility and inclusivity and the creative industries.



Rethinking Cultural Tourism (Richards, 2021) provides an overview of cultural tourism research, structured through a social practice perspective. Richards argues that traditional systems of supply and demand are increasingly challenged by new technologies and cultural globalisation and localisation, such that a practice approach that breaks down the producer/consumer divide is ever more relevant. It provides an analysis of new practices and spaces of cultural tourism, including street art, “New Tourist Areas”, walking tours and the curation of cultural tourism experiences. This volume, as noted in a review by Qu (2022) retains an urban focus, which reflects the strong links between cultural and urban tourism (Richards, 2022). This volume links together many different themes in the cultural tourism field, employing practice theory and the model of Interaction Ritual Chains (Collins, 2004). This can be contextualised by the ‘practice turn’ in the social sciences in general, and in recent tourism literature (Bargeman & Richards, 2020).

A monograph on *Cultural Tourism and Cantonese Opera* (Luo, 2022) positions Cantonese Opera as a cultural product of the Greater Bay Area of southern China. Cantonese opera is a traditional Chinese art form combining music, song, martial arts, acrobatics and acting into a richly symbolic performance, which was designated as UNESCO ICH in 2009. This artform declined in recent decades, and tourism has been seen as one means of reviving the tradition. The book starts with a general introduction to the background of Cantonese Opera and analyses the development of Cantonese opera as heritage and the challenges of conserving the artform in the face of globalisation. A case study of Macau analyses how recent support for cultural heritage stems from a desire to diversify a tourism economy dominated by casinos.

Asia is also the setting for the book *Cultural tourism in the Asia Pacific: heritage, city and rural hospitality* (Wong, See & Milligan, 2024). This edited collection reviews many aspects of cultural tourism, including nature and rural conservation policy and conflicts, ethnic minority heritage and folklore traditions and performances, and urban tourism activities. It highlights the unique features of cultural tourism in the Asia Pacific region in both rural and urban settings, although the contributions mainly focus on China and Malaysia.

Trono, Castronuovo and Kosmas (2024) edited a volume on *Managing natural and cultural heritage for a durable tourism*, which examines the challenges of ‘neoliberal tourism’ and the prospects for tourism degrowth. It argues there is a need to integrate cultural and natural heritage to increase the durability of tourism and attempts to develop a theoretical framework to this end. There is notable coverage of tangible (WHS) and intangible heritage, as well as the link between cultural and natural heritage. The global perspective includes much attention for cultural routes, mountain areas including the Alps and the Auvergne, cross-border areas, cultural landscapes, Buddhist Cultural Heritage in India and natural and marine sites. Innovative approaches are highlighted, including Virtual Heritage and Immersive Technologies in Jordan, Gamification and the Playable City and Artistic Hosting “an emergent urban artistic practice and hyper-local, micro residency model embedded in the private home settings, often the artists own.” This volume is notable for its emphasis on “the need to ‘govern’ tourism, imposing controls and seeking to attract moderate flows of quality tourists, including less affluent tourists, who are attentive to the environment”.

The book *Cultural Tourism Perspectives, Opportunities and Challenges* edited by Korstanje and Catenazzo (2024) also includes many diverse perspectives, including revisiting the work of Marc Augé, the Appropriation of Rural Culture, Maritime Tragedies and the intangible cultural heritage of the Elaphite Islands in Croatia (curiously included twice). However, the book contains no introduction or conclusion.

The monograph edited by Borowiecki, Fresa and Martín Civantos (2025) on *Innovative cultural tourism in European peripheries* derives from the INCULTUM EU-funded Horizon 2020 project. It analyses innovative business models such as ecosystem services contracts and digital narrative platforms, as means to enhance the sustainability and economic development of peripheral regions. This envisages the expansion of cultural tourism from a consumer product to a social tool. Contributions to this volume cover innovative business models, water heritage, cultural routes and cultural memory, but there is unfortunately no concluding chapter to tie these strands together.

A recent edited volume on *The Future of Cultural Tourism* examines different future scenarios for cultural tourism (Matteucci, Moretti, Calvi & Weber-Sabil (2025). This examines the underlying theme of authenticity from a variety of perspectives, including Posthumanist Cultural Tourism, Slow Cultural Tourism and cultural tourism in the Metaverse. In the final chapter Moretti and Matteucci conclude that cultural tourism has become vaguer and more porous, now so fluid that it is difficult to chart clear futures. They conclude that the future of cultural tourism is most likely to be heterotopian rather than utopian or dystopian. This perspective reflects the growing power struggles over heritage and its meaning.

The *Handbook of Research on Cultural Tourism and Sustainability* (Ribeiro de Almeida, Martins, Gonçalves, Quinteiro & Gasparini, 2022) provides sections dealing with Concepts and Methodologies, Stakeholder analysis and Case studies. The first section pays a lot of attention to sustainability, the second on various stakeholder groups, including the creative sector, and the third offers diverse case studies, including literary tourism, pilgrimage and favelas.



In the volume *Nuovo turismo culturale: Il marketing delle emozioni* (New cultural tourism: The marketing of emotions) Croci (2024) argues that mass cultural tourism is at risk of becoming a frustrating and unsatisfying experience in the face of rising digital expectations. The 'new cultural tourism', in contrast, involves a more thoughtful form of travel to create authentic connections between people and places. She emphasises Sustainability, Authenticity, Empathy and respect as being central to this process.

The growing range of books and research monographs on cultural tourism is at least partly related to recent EU-funded cultural tourism research, which also shows a pivot from urban to rural and remote areas (Richards et al., 2025). EU Horizon projects include large numbers of researchers and therefore favour the production of multi-author edited volumes. These have the advantage of being able to develop and sustain a line of argument, although not all take this opportunity.

One of the important themes that emerge from these books is the need to analyse the governance structures and processes that influence cultural tourism. This has become more important as cultural research has shifted from urban to rural and peripheral areas, and as intangible heritage has taken on a more important role in cultural tourism production and consumption. These volumes also underline the growing range of approaches to cultural tourism research, which is increasingly focusses on rural and peripheral areas, and the range of cases now available in different global regions.

6. Conclusions

The current review concurs with many recent studies in identifying a growing and diversifying body of cultural tourism research. Richards (2025) concludes that cultural tourism research is growing more rapidly than tourism research in general, even though the share of cultural tourism in international tourism flows remains stable. The effects of cultural tourism, as many studies indicate, go far beyond the number of tourists or volume of spend, because they include qualitative effects on local culture, the experience of place and the 'atmosphere' of the destination. A growing number of studies also recognise that cultural tourists have the potential to make important links with local residents, challenging the current antipathy towards 'mass cultural tourism' in some areas (Croce, 2024).

One of the most striking features of cultural tourism research in recent years has been the focus on technological change, particularly the growth of social media. Digital platforms and their users have a growing influence on travel decisions, highlighted by the flooding of small villages by sudden flows of tourists and the formation of 'TikTok queues' in cities such as Amsterdam. The growing volume of digital content creates a need for curation to support user choices (Richards, 2024). This is also changing the relationships between consumers, producers and a range of new intermediaries, which are now beginning to be investigated (Concha, 2019).

The new digital landscape of cultural tourism is also stimulating demand for brands and labels, most notably the UNESCO World Heritage Sites (WHS) and Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) designations. The effects of these brands are now the subject of extensive research, particularly related to tangible cultural heritage, but also increasingly to ICH. This movement also seems to be stimulating an analytical shift away from culture in general towards heritage, and from cultural tourism to cultural heritage tourism. However, cultural heritage tourism is not only rarely defined or distinguished from cultural tourism, but it also currently lacks a sound theoretical basis (Mzembe, Koens & Calvi, 2023). This is clearly a gap that will need consideration in future research. There are also interesting parallels between current debates and those which emerged in the 1980s surrounding 'heritage'. At that time, Hewison (1987) linked the preference for heritage over culture to Thatcherite discourse, which viewed 'culture' in a negative light. We might well be seeing a return to such positions with the rise of populism.

The growing centrality of heritage in the cultural tourism literature also calls for an assessment of the effects of this. For example, will this decrease attention for culture in the broader sense, and the issues linked to this (such as cultural rights, for example)? Will a heritage emphasis privilege more traditional readings of culture over more contemporary ones? This is particularly important given the increasing digitalisation of culture and the growth of hybrid cultures stimulated by migration, which might complicate the supposed link between communities and 'local' culture.

On a global scale, it is encouraging that a previously Anglo-Saxon centred field is now being enriched by a copious stream of research from China and to a lesser extent from other Asian countries. This has introduced new perspectives on cultural tourism, most notably the concept of 'Cultural Creative Tourism' linked to national policy in China. There is a danger that the previous hegemony will be replaced by a parallel development of research agendas in the West and China, with other world regions largely marginalised. This tendency is strengthened by the linguistic barriers in research (Richards et al., 2022).

7. Future research perspectives

The broadening and fragmenting field of cultural tourism research presents us with a challenge of connecting the different streams of research in a way that develops better insights rather than silos of knowledge. We not only need to connect the different streams within the tourism literature, but we also need to link tourism research with work in cultural studies, regional studies and other



fields. We should engage more actively with the urban and rural development literature, also considering the role of governance structures on the development of cultural tourism.

The shift towards intangible culture and the rise of creativity in tourism also presents a number of new perspectives, for example on the role of the 'creative class' in cultural tourism and the use of creativity as an attraction for tourists. One area that has gained increasing attention is the role of 'coolness' in making places more attractive to visit, and this in turn generates more attention for the role of youth as 'coolseekers' and creators. This may suggest that future cultural tourism attractions will not only have to be 'authentic', but also rebellious, original and vibrant (Pai, Liang, Chen & Zhang, 2025). The circulation of 'cool' places on social media also places more emphasis on the role of new technology in cultural tourism markets. The previous idea of cultural supply being packaged and distributed by the travel industry is changing - particularly through algorithmic and social curation of places.

The new-found concern with governance in cultural tourism is welcome, but it tends to concentrate on a relatively limited range of stakeholders. Local residents and tourists, for example, are not seen as stakeholders, even though they are impacted by tourism activity. The shift from destination management to place management (Friel, 2024) may broaden this approach, as tourists and residents are seen as placemaking actors who can initiate change in the destination.

Declaration of competing interest: None

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